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G. W. Phipps
N. Bosworth Rectory.
1 July 1864.

SALEM CHAPEL

Chronicles of Carlingford

SALEM CHAPEL

IN TWO VOLUMES

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SALEM CHAPEL.

CHAPTER XXI.

Mrs Vincent rose from the uneasy bed, where she had not slept, upon that dreadful Sunday morning, with feelings which it would be vain to attempt any description of. Snatches of momentary sleep more dreadful than wakefulness had fallen upon her during the awful night—moments of unconsciousness which plunged her into a deeper horror still, and from which she started thinking she heard Susan call. Had Susan called, had Susan come, in any dreadful plight of misery, her mother thought she could have borne it; but she could not, yet did, bear this, with the mingled passion and patience of a woman; one moment rising up against the intolerable, the next sitting down dumb

and steadfast before that terrible necessity which could not be resisted. She got up in the dim wintry morning with all that restless anguish in her heart, and took out her best black silk dress, and a clean cap to go under her bonnet. She offered a sacrifice and burnt-offering as she dressed herself in her snow-white cuffs, and composed her trim little figure into its Sunday neatness; for the minister's mother must go to chapel this dreadful day. No whisper of the torture she was enduring must breathe among the flock—nothing could excuse her from attending Salem, seeing her son's people, and hearing Mr Beecher preach, and holding up Arthur's standard at this dangerous crisis of the battle. She felt she was pale when she came into the sitting-room, but comforted herself with thinking that nobody in Salem knew that by nature she had a little tender winter bloom upon her face, and was not usually so downcast and heavy-eyed. Instinctively she rearranged the breakfast-table as she waited for the young minister from Homerton, who was not an early riser. Mr Beecher thought it rather cheerful than otherwise when he came in somewhat late and hurried, and found her waiting by the white covered table, with the fire bright and the tea made. He was in high spirits, as was natural. He thought Vincent was in very comfortable quarters, and had uncommonly pleasant rooms.

"Don't you think so? and one has just as great a chance of being uncomfortable as not in one's first charge," said the young preacher; "but we were all delighted to hear that Vincent had made an 'it. Liberal-minded people, I should say, if I may judge by Mr Tozer, who was uncommonly friendly last night. These sort of people are the strength of our connection — not great people, you know, but the flower of the middle classes. I am surprised you did not bring Miss Vincent with you for a little cheerful society at this time of the year."

"My daughter may perhaps come yet, before— before I leave," said Mrs Vincent, drawing herself up, with a little hauteur, as Mr Beecher thought, though in reality it was only a physical expression of that sob of agony to which she dared not give vent in audible sound.

"Oh, I thought it might be more cheerful for her in the winter," said the preacher, a little affronted that his interest in Vincent's pretty sister should be received so coldly. He was interrupted by the arrival of the post, for Carlingford was a profane country town, and had its letters on Sunday morning. The widow set herself desperately down in an arm-chair to read Arthur's letter. It made her heart beat loud with throbs so violent that a blindness came over her eyes, and her very life failed for an instant. It was very

short, very assured and certain — he was going to Northumberland, where the fugitives had gone—he was going to bring Susan back. Mr Beecher over his egg watched her reading this, and saw that she grew ashy, deathly pale. It was not possible for him to keep silent, or to refrain from wondering what it was.

"Dear me, I am afraid you are ill—can I get you anything?" he said, rising from the table.

Mrs Vincent folded up her letter. "Thank you; my tea will refresh me," she said, coming back to her seat. "I did not sleep very much last night, and my head aches: when people come to my time of life," said the little woman, with a faint heroical smile, "they seldom sleep well the first few nights in a new place. I hope you rested comfortably, Mr Beecher. Mr Vincent, Arthur's dear papa, used to say that he never preached well if he did not sleep well; and I have heard other ministers say it was a very true rule."

"If that is all, I hope you will be pleased to-day," said the preacher, with a little complaisance. "I always sleep well; nothing puts me much out in that respect. Perhaps it is about time to start now? I like to have a few minutes in the vestry before going into the pulpit. You know the way perhaps? or we can call at Mr Tozer's and get one of them to guide us."

"I think I know the way," said Mrs Vincent, faintly.

It was a slight comfort, in the midst of her martyrdom, to leave the room and have a moment to herself. She sank down by her bedside in an inarticulate agony of prayer, which doubtless God deciphered, though it never came to words, and rose up again to put on her bonnet, her neat shawl, her best pair of gloves. The smile that might have come on the face of a martyr at the stake dawned upon the little woman's lips as she caught sight of her own pale face in the glass, when she was tying her bonnet-strings. She was not thrusting her hand into the scorching flames, she was only pulling out the bows of black ribbon, and giving the last touch to that perfection of gentle neatness in which Arthur's mother, for his sake, must present herself to his people. She took Mr Beecher's arm afterwards, and walked with him, through the wintry sunshine and streams of churchgoers, to Salem. Perhaps she was just a little sententious in her talk to the young preacher, who would have stared had anybody told him what active and feverish wretchedness was in her heart. She quoted Arthur's dear father more than usual; she felt a little irritated in spite of herself by the complaisance of the young man from 'Omerton. Notwithstanding the dreadful pressure of her trouble, she felt that his excitement in the prospect of preaching to Arthur's people was quite ill-timed. What did it matter to him whether the Salem flock

liked him or not? were they not Arthur's people, pre-engaged to their own pastor? The gentle widow did what she could to bring Mr Beecher down as they walked through Grove Street. She remarked, gently, that where a minister was very popular, a stranger had but little chance of appreciation. "You must not be mortified if you see the congregation look disappointed when you come into the pulpit," said Mrs Vincent; "for my son, if he had not been called away so suddenly, was to commence a course of lectures to-day, and I believe a good deal of expectation was raised about them." The new preacher was perhaps a shade less buoyant when he resigned his friend's mother to Tozer at the door of the chapel, to be conducted to her pew. Salem was already about half filled; and the entering flock looked at Mrs Vincent, as she stood with the deacon in the porch, asking, with the courtesy of a royal personage, humble yet affable, after his wife and daughter. Tozer was a little overawed by the politeness of the minister's mother. He concluded that she was "quite the lady" in his private heart.

"If you tell me where the minister's seat is, I need not trouble you to go in," said Mrs Vincent.

"Mrs Tufton's uncommon punctual, and it's close upon her time," said Tozer; "being a single man, we've not set apart a seat for the minister—not till he's got some one as can sit in it; it's the old minis-

ter's seat, as is the only one we've set aside; for we've been a-letting of the pews uncommon this past month, and it don't answer to waste nothing in a chapel as is as expensive to keep up as Salem. It's our pride to give our minister a good salary, as you know, ma'am, and we've all got to pay up according; so there ain't no pew set apart for Mr Vincent—not till he's got a wife."

"Then I am to sit in Mr Tufton's pew?" said the minister's mother, not without a little sharpness.

"There ain't no more of them never at Salem, but Mrs Tufton," said Tozer. "Mr Tufton has had a shock, and the only one of a family they've at home is a great invalid, and never was within the chapel door in my time. Mr Tufton he do come now and again. He would have been here to-day, I make bold to say, but for the minister being called away. I hope you've 'eard from Mr Vincent, ma'am, and as he'll soon be back. It ain't a good thing for a congregation when the pastor takes to going off sudden. Here she is a-coming. Mrs Tufton, ma'am, this is Mrs Vincent, the minister's mother; she's been waiting for you to go into your pew."

"I hope I shall not be in your way," said Mrs Vincent, with her dignified air. "I have always been accustomed to see a seat for the minister; but as I am a stranger, I hope for once I shall not be in your way."

"Don't say a word!" cried Mrs Tufton. "I am as glad as possible to see Mr Vincent's mother. He is a precious young man. It's not a right principle, you know, but it's hard not to envy people that are so happy in their families; nothing would make my Tom take to the ministry, though his papa and I had set our hearts upon it; and he's in Australia, poor dear fellow! and my poor girl is such an invalid. I hope your daughter is pretty well? Come this way. I hope I shall see a great deal of you. Mr Tufton takes such an interest in his young brother; all that he wants is a little good advice—that is what the minister always tells me. All that Mr Vincent wants, he says, is a little good advice."

The latter part of this was communicated in a whisper, as the two ladies seated themselves in the minister's pew. After a momentary pause of private devotion, Mrs Tufton again took up the strain where she had left it off.

"I assure you, we take the greatest interest in him at the cottage. He doesn't come to see us so often as Mr Tufton would wish, but I daresay he has other things to do. The minister often says to me that he is a precious young man, is Mr Vincent, and that a little good advice and attention to those that know better is all he wants to make him a shining light; and I am sure he will want no good advice Mr Tufton

can give him. So you may keep your mind easy—you may keep your mind quite easy. In any difficulty that could occur, I am sure the minister would act as if he were his own son."

"You are very kind; but I hope no difficulty will occur," said Mrs Vincent, with a little quiver in her lip.

"I hope not, indeed; but there are so many people to please in a flock," said the late minister's wife, with a sigh. "*We* always got on very well, for Mr Tufton is not one to take a deal of notice of any unpleasantness; but you know as well as I do that it takes a deal of attention to keep all matters straight. If you'll excuse me, it's a great pity Mr Vincent has gone away to-day. Nothing would have made my husband leave his post just as he was intimated to begin a course of lectures. It's *very* excusable in Mr Vincent, because he hasn't that experience that's necessary. I always say he's very excusable, being such a young man; and we have no doubt he'll get on very well if he does but take advice."

"My son was very unwilling to go; but it was quite necessary. His sister," said Mrs Vincent, clasping her hands tight under her shawl to balance the pang in her heart, "was with some friends—whom we heard something unpleasant about—and he went to bring her home. I expect them—to-morrow."

The poor mother shut her lips close when she had said the words, to keep in the cry or sob that seemed bursting from them. Yes, God help her, she expected them; perhaps to-morrow—perhaps that same dreadful night; but even in the height of her anguish there occurred to Mrs Vincent a forlorn prayer that they might not come back that Sunday. Rather another agonising night than that all the "Chapel folks" should be aware that their pastor was rushing wildly along distant railways on the day of rest. The fact that he was doing so added a pang to her own trouble. Total disarrangement, chaos, all the old habitudes of life gone to wreck, and only desperation and misery left, was the sensation produced by that interruption of all religious use and wont. It came upon her with an acute sting, to think that her poor young minister was travelling that Sunday: just as in Arthur's own experience at that same moment, the utter incoherence, chaos, and wretchedness into which his life had suddenly fallen, breathed upon him in the sound of the church-bells.

"Dear me, I am very sorry!" said Mrs Tufton; "some fever or something, I suppose—something that's catching? Dear, dear me, I am so sorry! but there are some people that never take infection; a little camphor is such a nice thing to carry about—it can't do any harm, you know. Mrs Tozer tells me he is a very

nice young man, Mr Vincent's friend from 'Omerton. I don't like to say such a thing of a girl, but I do believe your son could have *that* Phœbe any day for asking, Mrs Vincent. I can't bear forward girls, for my part—that is her just going into the pew, with the pink bonnet; oh, you know her!—to be sure, Mrs Pigeon remarked you were sure to go *there;* though I should have hoped we would have seen you as soon as any one in Carlingford."

"Indeed, I have been much disappointed not to call. I—I hope I shall — to-morrow," said the widow, to whom to-morrow loomed dark like another world, and who could not help repeating over and over the dreaded name.

"That is Maria Pigeon all in white — to be only tradespeople they *do* dress more than I approve of," said Mrs Tufton. "My Adelaide, I am sure, never went like that. Many people think Maria a deal nicer-looking than Phœbe Tozer, but her mother is *so* particular—more than particular—what I call troublesome, you know. You can't turn round without giving her offence. Dear me, how my tongue is going! the minister would say I was just at my old imprudent tricks—but you, that were a minister's wife, can understand. She *is* such a difficult woman to deal with. I am sure Mr Tufton is always telling them to wait, and that Mr Vincent is

a young man yet, and experience is all he wants. I wish he had a good wife to keep him straight; but I don't know that *that* would be advisable either, because of Phœbe and the rest. Dear, dear, it is a difficult thing to know what to do!—but Mr Tufton always says, If he had a little more experience—— Bless me, the young man is in the pulpit!" said Mrs Tufton, coming to a sudden standstill, growing very red, and picking up her hymn-book. Very seldom had the good woman such a chance of talk. She ran herself so out of breath that she could not join in that first hymn.

But Mrs Vincent, who had a sensation that the pew, and indeed the whole chapel, trembled with the trembling that was in her own frame, but who felt at the same time that everybody was looking at her, and that Arthur's credit was involved, stood up steadfastly, holding her book firm in both her hands, and with an effort almost too much for her, the heroism of a martyr, added her soft voice, touched with age, yet still melodious and true, to the song of praise. The words choked her as she uttered them, yet with a kind of desperate courage she kept on. Praise!—it happened to be a very effusive hymn that day, an utterance of unmitigated thanksgiving; fortunately she had not sufficient command of her mind or wits to see clearly what she was singing, or to

enter into the wonderful bitter difference between the thanks she was uttering and the position in which she stood. Could she give God thanks for Susan's ruin, or rejoice in the light He had given, when it revealed only misery? She was not called upon to answer that hard question. She stood up mechanically with her white face set in pale steadfastness, and was only aware that she was singing, keeping the tune, and making herself noways remarked among the crowd of strange people, many of whom turned curious eyes towards her. She stood with both her feet set firm on the floor, both her hands holding fast to the book, and over the ache of frightful suspense in her heart came the soft voice of her singing, which for once in her life meant nothing except a forlorn determination to keep up and hold herself erect and vigilant, sentinel over Arthur's fortunes and his people's thoughts.

Mr Beecher's sermon was undeniably clever; the Salem folks pricked up their ears at the sound of it, recalling as it did that period of delightful excitation when they were hearing candidates, and felt themselves the dispensers of patronage. That was over now, and they were wedded to one; but the bond of union between themselves and their pastor was far from being indissoluble, and they contemplated this new aspirant to their favour with feelings stimulated

and piquant, as a not inconsolable husband, likely to become a widower, might contemplate the general female public, out of which candidates for the problematically vacant place might arise. Mrs Pigeon, who was the leader of the opposition, and whose daughter Mr Vincent had not distinguished, whose house he had not specially frequented, and whom, most of all, he had passed in the street without recognition, made a note of this man from 'Omerton. If the painful necessity of dismissing the present pastor should occur—as such things did occur, deplorable though they were—it might be worth while sending for Mr Beecher. She made a note of him privately in her mind, as she sat listening with ostentatious attention, nodding her head now and then by way of assent to his statements. Mrs Vincent remarked her as she watched the congregation from the minister's pew, with her jealous mother's eyes. The Tozers were not so devoted in their listening. Mrs Tozer's brilliant cherry-coloured bonnet visibly drooped once or twice with a blessed irregularity of motion; all these signs Mrs Vincent perceived as she sat in preternatural acute consciousness of everything round her, by Mrs Tufton's side. She was even aware that the sermon was clever; she remembered expressions in it long after, which somehow got burned in, without any will of hers, upon her breaking heart. The subdued

anguish that was in her collected fuel for its own silent consuming fire, even in the congregation of Salem, where, very upright, very watchful, afraid to relax her strained nerves even by leaning back or forward, she lived through the long service as if through a year of suffering.

The congregation dispersed in a buzz of talk and curiosity. Everybody wanted to know where the minister had gone, and what had taken him away. "I can't say as I think he's using of us well," said somebody, whom Mrs Vincent could hear as she made her way to the door. "Business of his own! a minister ain't got no right to have business of his own, leastways on Sundays. Preaching's his business. I don't hold with that notion. He's in our employ, and we pays him well——"

Here a whisper from some charitable bystander directed the speaker's eyes to Mrs Vincent, who was close behind.

"Well! it ain't nothing to me who hears me," said this rebellious member, not without a certain vulgar pleasure in his power of insult. "We pays him well, as I say; I have to stick to my business well or ill, and I don't see no reason why the minister should be different. If he don't mind us as pays him, why, another will."

"Oh, I've been waiting to catch your eye," said Mrs

Pigeon, darting forward at this crisis to Mrs Tufton; "wasn't *that* a sweet sermon? that's refreshing, that is! I haven't listened to anything as has roused me up like that—no, not since dear Mr Tufton came first to Carlingford; as for what we've been hearing of late, I don't say it's not clever, but, oh, it's cold! and for them as like good gospel preaching and rousing up, I must confess as Mr Vincent——"

"Hush! Mrs Pigeon—Mrs Vincent," said Mrs Tufton, hurriedly; "you two ladies should have been introduced at the first. Mr Pigeon is one of our deacons and leading men, Mrs Vincent, and I don't doubt you've often and often heard your son talking of him. We are always discussing Mr Vincent, because he is our own pastor now, you know; and a precious young man he is—and all that he wants is a little experience, as Mr Tufton always says."

"Oh, I *am* sorry!—I beg your pardon, I'm sure," cried Mrs Pigeon; "but I am one as always speaks my mind, and don't go back of my word. Folks as sees a deal of the minister," continued the poulterer's wife, not without a glance at that cherry-coloured bonnet which had nodded during the sermon, and to which poor Mrs Vincent felt a certain gratitude, "may know different; but me as don't have much chance, except in chapel, I will say as I think he wants speaking to: most folks do—specially young

folks, when they're making a start in the world. He's too high, he is, for us plain Salem folks; what we want is a man as preaches gospel sermons—real rousing-up discourses — and sits down pleasant to his tea, and makes hisself friendly. I never was one as thought a minister couldn't do wrong. I always said as they were just like other men, liking grand dinners and grand folks, and the vanities of this world;—not meaning no offence, Mrs Vincent, neither to you nor the minister—but I must say as I think, he's a deal too high."

"My son has had very good training," said the widow, not without dignity. "His dear father had many good friends who have taken an interest in him. He has always been accustomed to good society; and I must say, at the same time," added Mrs Vincent, "that I never knew Arthur to fail in courtesy to the poorer brethren. If he has done so, I am sure it has been unintentionally. It is quite against my principles and his dear father's to show any respect to persons. If he has shown any neglect of Mrs Pigeon's family," continued the mild diplomatist, "it must have been because he thought them less, and not more in need of him than the rest of the flock."

Mrs Pigeon listened with open mouth, but total discomfiture: whether this was a compliment or a reprimand was totally beyond her power to make out.

She cried, "Oh, I'm sure!" in a tone which was half defensive and half deprecating. Mrs Pigeon, however, intended nothing less than to terminate the conversation at this interesting point, and it was with utter dismay that she perceived Mrs Vincent sweep past before she had recovered herself—sweep past—though that black silk gown was of very moderate dimensions, and the trim little figure was noways majestic. The minister's mother made a curtsy to the astonished wife of the poulterer; she said "good morning" with a gracious bow, and went upon her way before Mrs Pigeon had recovered her breath. Perfect victory attended the gentle widow in this little passage of arms. Her assailant fell back, repeating in a subdued tone, "Well, I'm sure!" Mrs Pigeon, like Tozer, granted that the minister's mother was "quite the lady," henceforward, in her heart.

And Mrs Vincent passed on victorious; yes, victorious, and conscious of her victory, though giddy with secret anguish, and feeling as if every obstacle that hindered her return was a conscious cruelty. They could not have arrived this morning—it was impossible; yet she burned to get back to see whether impossibility might not be accomplished for once, and Susan be there awaiting her. The first to detain her was Mrs Tufton, who hurried, with added respect, after her, triumphing secretly in Mrs Pigeon's defeat.

"I am so glad you gave her her answer," said Mrs Tufton; "bless me! how pleased Adelaide will be when I tell her! I always said it would be well for a minister's wife to have a spirit. Won't you come and take a bit of dinner with us, as Mr Vincent is not at home? Oh, I daresay somebody will ask Mr Beecher. It does not do to pay too much attention to the young men that come to preach—though I think he *was* clever. You won't come?—a headache?—poor dear! You're worrying about your daughter, I am sure; but I wouldn't, if I were you. Young girls in health don't take infection. She'll come back all right, you'll see. Well—good-bye. Don't come in the evening if you have a headache. I shouldn't, if I were you. Good-bye—and to-morrow, if all is well, we'll look for you. Siloam Cottage—just a little way past Salem—you can't miss the way."

"Yes, thank you—to-morrow," said Mrs Vincent. If only anybody could have known what dreadful work it was keeping up that smile, holding upright as she did! Then she went on a little way in peace, half-crazed with the misery that consumed her, yet unnaturally vigilant and on the alert, always holding up Arthur's standard at that critical hour when he had no representative but herself in his field of battle. But the poor mother was not long allowed this interval of peace. After a few minutes, the Tozers, who were

going the same way, came up to her, and surrounded her like a bodyguard.

"I liked that sermon, ma'am," said Tozer; "there was a deal that was practical in that sermon. If ever we should be in the way of hearing candidates again—and shortsighted creatures like us never knows what's a-going to happen—I'd put down that young man's name for an 'earing. There ain't a word to be said again' the minister's sermons in the matter of talent. They're full of mind, ma'am—they're philosophical, that's what they are; and the pews we've let in Salem since he come, proves it, let folks say what they will. But if there *is* a want, it's in the application. He don't press it home upon their consciences, not as some on us expected; and Mr Tufton being all in that line, as you may say, makes it show the more. If I was going to make a change again—not as I mean nothing of the kind, nor as the Salem folks has ever took it into their heads—I'd like to have a little o' both ways, that's what I'd like."

"When you get a minister of independent mind, Mr Tozer, if he gives you the best he has, he ought to be allowed to choose his own way," said Mrs Vincent. "My dear husband always said so, and he had great experience. Mr Vincent's son, I know, will never want friends."

"I am sure as long as the minister keeps to his

duty, he'll always find friends in Tozer and me," said the deacon's wife, striking in; "and though there may be folks in a finer way, there ain't no such good friends a pastor can have as in his own flock. As for hearing candidates and that, Tozer ought to know as none on us would hear of such a thing. I don't see no reason why Mr Vincent shouldn't settle down in Carlingford and make himself comfortable. We're all his friends as long as he's at his post."

"Oh, ma, I am sure he *is* at his post," cried Phœbe; "he has gone away because he could not help it. I am quite sure," continued the modest maiden, casting down her eyes, "that he would *never* have left but for a good reason! Oh, I am confident he is fond of Carlingford *now*. He would not go away if he had not some duty—I am certain he would not!"

"If Phœbe is better informed than the rest of us, it ain't nobody's business as I can see," said the father, with a short laugh. "I always like the young folks to manage them matters among themselves; but I take my own view, miss, for all that."

"Oh, Pa, how can you talk so," cried Phœbe, in virgin confusion, "to make Mrs Vincent think——"

"Indeed, nothing will make me think otherwise than I know," said Mrs Vincent, with a voice which extinguished Phœbe. "I understand my son. He does not bestow his confidence very easily; and I am

sure he is quite able to manage *all* the matters he may have in hand," added the widow, not without significance. Not all her anxiety for Arthur, not all her personal wretchedness, could unwoman the minister's mother so much as to make her forgive or overlook Phœbe's presumption. She could not have let this pretendant to her son's affections off without transfixing her with a passing arrow. Human endurance has its limits. Mrs Vincent could bear anything for Arthur except this pretence of a special interest in him.

"Oh, I am sure I never meant——!" faltered Phœbe; but she could get no further, and even her mother did not come to the rescue.

"Them things had much best not be talked of," said Mrs Tozer, sharply. "Mr Beecher is coming in to have a bit of dinner. You mightn't have things comfortable where you are, the minister being away, and you used to your own house. Won't you come in with us and eat a bit of dinner? I never can swallow a morsel when I'm by myself. It's lonesome for you in them rooms, and us so near. There ain't no ceremony nor nonsense, but we'll be pleased if you'll come."

"Thank you very much," said Mrs Vincent, who could not forget that the cherry-coloured bonnet had nodded during Mr Beecher's sermon, "but I slept

badly last night. At my time of life a new bed often makes one sleepless, and I have a bad headache. I think I will go and lie down. Many thanks. It is very kind of you to ask me. I hope I shall see you," said the widow, with a slight shiver, repeating her formula, "to-morrow."

"You can't take us amiss," said Mrs Tozer; "there's always enough for an extra one, if it isn't grand or any ceremony; or if you'll come to tea and go to church with us at night? Phœbe can run over and see how you find yourself. Good mornin'. I'm sorry you'll not come in."

"Oh, I wish you would let me go with you and nurse you," said Phœbe, not without a glance in the other direction at the approaching form of the young man from 'Omerton, "I *am* so frightened you don't like me!—but I'll come over before tea, and sit with you if your headache is not better. If I could only make you fancy I was Miss Vincent!" said Phœbe, with pink pleading looks.

Mrs Vincent turned away more smartly under the effect of that stimulant. She crossed George Street, towards her son's rooms, a solitary little figure, in the flood of winter sunshine—not dismal to look at, save for its black dress, trim, alert, upright still. And the heart within, which ached with positive throbs of pain, had roused up under that last provocation, and was

stinging with indignation and anger, pure womanly, and not to be deadened by any anguish. Phœbe's impertinence, as she called it to herself, took her out of her own far heavier trouble. To think of that pink creature having designs upon *her* boy, and taking upon herself little airs of conquest! To encounter Phœbe's wiles overwhelmed Arthur with shame and annoyance; but they exasperated his mother. She went home with a steadier ring in her little light footstep. But the fumes of that temporary excitement had faded when the door opened upon her—the blank door, with the little maid open-mouthed behind, who did not look her in the face, and who had nothing to communicate: the sitting-room up-stairs lay blank in utter solitude—all the books put away according to Sunday custom, and the cover of Arthur's letter lying on the table startling his mother into wild hopes that some other communication had come for her. She sank down upon a chair, and covered her pale face with her hands—torture intolerable, unendurable; but oh, how certainly to be endured and put up with! This poor mother, who had met with many a heavy sorrow in her day, though never any so hideous as this, was no excitable, passionate creature, but a wholesome, daylight woman, in whom no strain of superlative emotions had choked up the natural channels of relief. She wept a few bitter, heavy tears under cover of her

clasped hands—tears which took away the dreadful pressure upon her brain, and made it easier to bear for the moment. Then she went away in her patience, and took off her bonnet, and prepared herself for the calm of the dreadful day of which so small a portion had yet passed. She pretended to dine, that no outlet might be left to gossip on that score. She took a good book and lay down upon the sofa in the awful silence—the moments creeping, stealing over her in a tedious procession which she could almost see—the silence throbbing all around as if with the beats of her own heart; how was it that the walls of the house stood steady with those throbs palpitating within their dull enclosure? But there was this comfort at least, that nobody fathomed Mrs Vincent in that speechless martrydom of hers—nobody guessed the horror in her heart—nobody imagined that there was anything of tragic meaning under that composed aspect. She went to church again in the evening to escape Phœbe's "nursing," and sat there choking with the anticipation that meantime her son was bringing Susan home. She walked home with Beecher, devoured by feverish hopes and fears, found still no one there, with an unutterable pang, yet relief, and sat with the young man from 'Omerton for a horrible hour or two, till the strain had all but killed her. But nobody came; nobody came all through the hideous night. Holding

with half-frantic hands to the thread of life, which could ill bear this total want of all its usual sustenance, but which must not be sacrificed for her children's sake—keeping alive, she could not tell how, without food, without rest, without even prayer—nothing but a fever of dumb entreaty coming to her mind when she sought some forlorn comfort from the mere fact of going on her knees—Mrs Vincent lived through the night and the morning. Another horrible, sunshiny, cheerful day; but no sound in earth or heaven to say they were coming—no arrival, no letter—nothing but hopeless, sickening, intolerable suspense—suspense all the more intolerable because it had to be borne.

CHAPTER XXII.

To-morrow! to-morrow was Monday morning, a new day, a new work-week—cheerful, healthful, and exhilarating—bright with that frosty sunshine, which carried comparative comfort to many a poor house in Carlingford. The widow's face was sharper, paler, of a wonderful ashy colour. Nature could not go on under such a struggle without showing signs of it. Beecher, who was not to go until a late train, took leave of her as soon as he could, not without a little fright, and betook himself to Tozer's, where he said she overawed him with her grand manners, and where he was led to admit that Vincent had always been a little "high." If she could have abandoned herself to her dreadful vigil, perhaps Mrs Vincent might have found it easier, perhaps harder—she herself thought the former; but she dared not give up to it. She had to set her face like a flint—she was Arthur's representative, and had still to show a steadfast front of battle for him, and

if not discomfit, still confront his enemies. She had to call at Siloam Cottage, at Mrs Tozer's, to do what else might be necessary for the propitiation of the flock. She never dreamed of saying to herself that she could not do it; there was no question of that; the flag had to be kept flying for Arthur. No friend of his must be jeopardised, no whisper allowed to rise which his mother could prevent: she had been a minister's wife for thirty years; well had she learned in that time, like Mrs Tufton, that a deal of attention was needed to keep all things straight.

Accordingly, in the height of her excitement and anxiety, believing that any moment the poor fugitive might be brought home, the widow, in her unflinching martyrdom, once more put on her bonnet, and drew out her black ribbon into bows of matchless neatness. Though she wrung her poor hands in speechless anguish as she went out of the room, it was with composed, though colourless lips, that she spoke to the little maid in the hall. "Mr Vincent may come home any time to-day," said the widow; "you must have some lunch ready, and tea; perhaps his sister may be with him—or—or she may come alone. Any one who comes is to be taken up-stairs. I will not be long gone; and I am going to Mrs Tufton's, if anybody should want me——"

At this moment a knock came to the door—a hurried

single knock, always alarming, and sounding like an evil omen. Mrs Vincent's voice failed her at that sound—most likely her face went into convulsive twitches, for the maid stood staring at her, too much startled to open the door, until a wild gesture from the speechless woman, who was herself unable to move, her breath almost forsaking her, and coming in sobs, recalled the girl to her senses. The door was opened, and Mrs Vincent stood with burning eyes gazing out. Ah, not Susan! never Susan!—a little, stout, rustic figure, all weary and dishevelled, looking ashamed, frightened, almost disreputable in utter forlornness and unhappiness. Mrs Vincent gave a great sob to get breath, and dropped upon the chair, and held out her hand to Mary. She had forgotten Mary—forgotten her momentary comfort in the fact that Susan's flight was not alone. Now was it life or death the girl was bringing? She drew the frightened creature near, close, and shrieked, as she thought, her question in her ear. "What? what?" said Mrs Vincent in her own mind; but no sound came to Mary's ears.

"O missis dear, missis dear!" sobbed the girl. "I've been and told Mr Arthur exact where she is—he's gone to fetch her home. O missis, don't take on! they'll soon be here. Miss Susan's living, she ain't dead. O missis, missis, she ain't dead—it might be worse nor it is."

At these words Mrs Vincent roused herself up once more. "My daughter has been ill," she said in gasps, turning a dreadful look upon the servant of the house. Then she rose, took hold of Mary's arm, and went upstairs with her, holding her fast. She shut the door with her own hands when they got back to the lonely parlour full of daylight and silence. "Miss Susan has been ill?" she said once more with parched lips, looking again, with that full blank gaze which seemed to deny and defy any other answer, in Mary's frightened face.

"O missis, don't take on!" sobbed the terrified girl.

"No, oh no, no, that is impossible. I can't take on, Mary, if I would—oh no, not now," said the poor widow, with what seemed a momentary wandering of her strained senses. "Tell me all—I am ready to hear it all."

And then Mary began the pitiful story, the same they had heard in Lonsdale—the sudden arrival of the girl and her governess, and innocent Susan's puzzled interest in them; Mr Fordham's appearance afterwards, his sudden snatch at the stranger, his ready use of Arthur's letter, which Susan was disturbed about, to persuade her that she must instantly go to her mother and set all right; the journey bringing them late at night to an unknown place, which, with the boom of the unexpected sea in their ears, the defenceless de-

ceived creatures found out not to be Carlingford. Mary knew nothing of the scene which had been enacted up-stairs, when the villanous scheme was made known to the unhappy victim. She could tell nothing but by guesses of what had passed and followed, and Mary, of course, by a natural certainty, guessed the worst. But next day Susan had written to her mother, either because she was still deceived or still innocent; and the next day again Mary was sent away under a pretence of being sent to church, and the false Fordham himself had conducted her to town and left her there. Such was Mary's tale. Last night she had met Mr Arthur and given him the address. Now, no doubt, they were on their way,—if only missis would not take on! "No," said the widow once more, with speechless lips. Take on! oh no, never more. Surely all these light afflictions that could bring tears were over now—nothing but horror and agony remained. The poor mother sat for a little in a dreadful silence, aching all over her anguished frame. Nothing was to be said or done; the pause of utter misery, in which thought itself had no place, but one horrible sensation of suffering was all that remained of life, passed over her; then a faint agonised smile fluttered upon her white lips. She drew on her glove again slowly and with pain. "I must go out, Mary," said Arthur's mother. "I must do my duty if the world were all

breaking up, as I—I think it is; and you must stay here and tell my poor darling her mother will come back to her directly. And don't talk to the other servant, Mary. You shall be like my own child if you will stand by us now."

"O missis dear, not a word—not if it was to save my life!" said poor Mary, through her tears.

And in her bravery and desperation the widow went out to her other forlorn hope. She went away out of the doors which enclosed at least the knowledge of this event, through the everyday streets, where, if there were other tragedies, nobody knew of them any more than of hers. She had her veil over her face, on which that shadow had settled, and no one could have suspected her of carrying a broken heart through those sunshiny ways. She could not think or anticipate or even fear anything further. Susan might die under that load of shame and anguish, but her mother apprehended, was sensible of, nothing more. The worst had come, except for Arthur, who might be helped out of his troubles. So, stunned and hopeless, she set out to visit Arthur's people, with a courage more desperate than that of battle. That was the duty which must be done if the world went to pieces—to talk to Adelaide Tufton and hear her sharp criticism and bitter gossip—to listen to the old minister dawdling forth his slow sentiments—to visit the Tozers and soothe their feel-

ings, and hear what they had to say. An *auto-da-fé* in the old Spanish fashion would have been easier, to be sure; but this was how the minister's mother, in the depths of unknown anguish and calamity, was expected to exert herself, the only way she could serve her son.

The parlour in Siloam Cottage was as green and obscure, as warm and close, as of old. The big geranium had grown, and covered the little window still more completely, and the fire burned with virulence, conscious of the frost. The minister's invalid daughter, with the colourless face and sharp eyes, was still knitting, leaning back upon her pillows. Poor Mrs Vincent, when she sat down, as near the door as possible, feeling as if she could not get breath, became immediately aware that to confront those eyes was a more dangerous process than any which she had yet been subjected to in Carlingford. They penetrated through her, keen with the restless life and curiosity, which made up to that disabled woman for the privations of her existence. In the dim green parlour the minister's mother saw nothing but Adelaide Tufton's eyes. If they had been beautiful eyes the effect would have been less surprising; but they were not beautiful; they were pale blue, and had something of the shrill shining of a rainy sky in the glistening white, which counted for far more than the faint watery colour. Mrs Vin-

cent gave way before them as she had never yet done. She cast down her own eyes, and drew back her chair, and even faltered in her speech, when she was obliged to face their observation. The danger was all the greater for being unexpected. As for Mrs Tufton, that good woman was in a flutter of interest and sympathy. She wanted to know whether Susan had gone through all the orthodox number of fevers and youthful ailments, and was in her element talking of the merits of camphor as a preventive, and of all the means that might be used to avoid infection.

"When my children were young, and their papa always being noted for so active a man among his people, I don't know what I should have done if I had been easily frightened," said Mrs Tufton. "Don't worry—keep her quiet, and give her——"

"Mrs Vincent never said she was afraid of infection," said Adelaide. "Is it typhus fever? My mother jumps at everything, and never stops to inquire. I daresay it's something quite different. Love affairs? Oh no; of course we don't want you to tell us. I don't think Phœbe Tozer will die of her failure. This young man from Homerton will console her. Has your son recovered his little affair with the young Dowager, Mrs Vincent? He dined there, you know. I daresay his head was turned; but there is one safeguard with those fine ladies. If a man has

his wits about him, he can always know that they mean nothing all the time."

"Indeed, I don't know what you mean. My son knows Lady Western, I believe; I remember one time he dined there. My Arthur," said the mother, with a faint smile, "is not one to have his head turned. He has been used to be thought a great deal of at home."

"Ah, he's a precious young man!" said Mr Tufton, see-sawing the air with his large grey hand. "I am much interested in my dear young brother. He thinks too much, perhaps—too much—of pleasing the carnal mind; and my people, that have been used to practical preaching so long, find the difference. But when he has deeper experiences——"

"Stuff!" said the invalid, turning her head half aside; "you know the chapel has filled since he came. Even when they are asses like your Salem people, you know they like a man with brains. I don't see that it matters much what Mr Vincent goes wrong in; he was sure to go wrong somehow. I gave him six months, but he has got through the six months, and they have not killed him off yet. What does he mean, thrusting himself into other people's messes? As far as I can make out, it's quite a little tragedy. There was that Mrs Hilyard, you know—the woman in Back Grove Street. Ah, you know her!" said Adelaide,

keenly, seeing the little shiver with which the visitor received the name.

"I have heard my son speak of her," said the widow, faintly.

"She was some connection of the Bedford family," said Adelaide, going on, with her curious eyes fixed on Mrs Vincent's face, who quailed before her, "and she married a half brother of Lady Western's—a desperate rascal he was. They had one baby, and then she left him—one baby, a girl, that has grown up an idiot; and here this lady lives—a poor needlewoman—to keep the girl safe, somehow, out of her father's hand. Why he should want to have her I can't exactly tell. I suspect, because she's pretty, to make a decoy of her, and sell her somehow, either to be married, or worse——"

"Adelaide!" cried Mrs Tufton; "oh, my dear, do mind what you're saying; Mrs Vincent does not know you. What can she think if you talk like that?"

"Mrs Vincent sees well enough I am not a girl to be frightened for words," said the sick woman. "Now, what I want to know is, what has your son to do with it? He's gone off after them, now, for some reason or other; of course I don't expect you to tell me. Perhaps Lady Western has sent him?—never mind, I will find out; but I know it has something to do with Mrs Hilyard, for they both went off from Carling-

ford the same day. I have no share in life for myself," said Adelaide, with another keen look at the stranger; "and so, instead of comforting myself that it's all for the best, as papa says, I interfere with my fellow-creatures. Oh, pray, don't be sorry for me! I get on as well as most people. Nobody in this place ever succeeds in concealing anything from me."

"Indeed it is a pity when people have anything to conceal," said poor Mrs Vincent, thinking, with a sensation of deadly sickness at her heart, of the awful secret which was in Mary's keeping, and faltering, in spite of all her self-command. She rose up hurriedly, when she met once more the glance of those sharp eyes: she could not bear that investigation; all her dreadful suspense and excitement seemed to ooze out unawares, and betray themselves; her only safety seemed in flight.

"This is a very short visit," said Mr Tufton. "My dear anxious sister, we can only pray you may be comforted. All things work together for good; you don't need to be told that. It's sure to be for the best, whatever happens: take that consolation to your heart—it's sure to be for the best."

"If her daughter dies and her son is dismissed, I wonder will that be for the best?" said Adelaide Tufton, as soon as the widow had left the room. Mrs Vincent's ears, made acute by suffering, caught enough

of this valedictory address to realise, if that were possible, an additional pang. Kind Mrs Tufton did not hear it, not being in any such state of feverish susceptibility. She, on the contrary, kissed the mother, whom she pitied with all her heart, and entreated her not to worry. "A young healthy girl does not fall ill for nothing. You'll see things will turn out all right," said the kind soul; and Mrs Vincent went upon her forlorn way.

At Mrs Tozer's the minister's mother found a little committee assembled. Mrs Brown was there from the Devonshire Dairy, and Mrs Pigeon, whose gratification in being able to hail Mrs Vincent as an acquaintance, to the confusion of the dairywoman and amazement of Mrs Tozer, almost restored the minister to that lady's favour. They were in the drawing-room, where, in honour of the expected visitors, a fire had been lighted; and as Mrs Vincent ascended the dark staircase, she obtained a passing glimpse of Mr Beecher seated at the table in the parlour studying 'The Railway Guide,' which Phœbe expounded to him, until they were both sent for up-stairs. Altogether the conjunction did not look promising for Arthur's interests. She went in thrilling with a touch of exasperation and defiance. Now was the time to make a final stand for Arthur. This covert rebellion could be deprecated no longer.

"I expect my son home to-day," said the brave mother, gulping down all the pangs of her expectation. "I think, now that I see for myself how much he is thought of in Carlingford, I ought to make an apology to the Salem people. It was I that induced him to go away, not thinking that one Sunday would be such a great matter; but indeed it was very gratifying to me to see how disappointed everybody was. I hope Mr Beecher will pardon me, for I am sure he preached us a very nice sermon, and we were all grateful for it; but, naturally on my dear boy's account, to see how disappointed everybody was, was a great gratification to me."

"Oh! I did not mind," said Mr Beecher, with a little laugh of embarrassment; but the young man was much taken aback, and stared with astonished looks before he answered, at this totally unexpected address. Having thus floored one of her adversaries, and seeing the female foe more voluble and ready, quite prepared to answer her, Mrs Vincent blandly proceeded.

"And this, you know, Mrs Tozer, was all the more gratifying to me, because I was not quite sure that Arthur had done wisely in choosing Carlingford. His dear father had so many friends in our denomination, and people are so kind as to speak of my boy as such a rising young man. Before I knew Carlingford,"

said the widow, looking round her with an air of gentle superiority, "I used to regret my son had not accepted the invitation from Liverpool. Many people said to me that his talents would have had so much more room there; but I am reconciled now," she added, turning her mild eyes upon Mrs Pigeon, who showed symptoms of resistance. "I may say I am quite satisfied now. He would have been better off, and had more opportunity of making himself a position in Liverpool, but what is that in comparison with the attachment of a flock?"

"Well, indeed, that's just the thing, ma'am," said Mrs Brown, who imagined herself addressed; "we *are* fond of him. I always said he was an uncommon nice young man; and if he was but to settle down——"

"That will come in time," said the minister's mother, graciously; "and I am glad, for my part, that he has been away, for it shows me how his dear people feel towards him; and though he would have been, of course, better off in Liverpool, I would never consider that in comparison. They still want to have him, you know, and keep writing me letters, and him too, I don't doubt; but after what I have seen, I could *never* advise him to break the link that has been formed here. The connection between pastor and people is a sacred tie; it should *never* be broken," said Mrs Vincent, with mild grandeur, "for anything so poor as a

money object; but my dear boy is far above any such consideration as that."

"Ah!" said Mrs Pigeon, drawing a long breath of involuntary awe and admiration; "and I don't doubt as the pastor would have been a deal better off in Liverpool," she added, after a pause, quite overpowered by that master-stroke.

"It's a deal bigger a place," suggested Mrs Tozer; "and grander folks, I don't have a doubt," she too added, after an interval. This new idea took away their breath.

"But, ah! what is that to affection," said Arthur's artful mother, "when a minister has the love of his flock! My dear Mrs Pigeon, though a mother is naturally anxious for her son, nothing on earth would induce me to advise him to break such a tie as that!"

"And indeed, ma'am, it's as a Christian mother should act," gasped the poulterer's subdued wife. Mrs Brown made a little movement of admiring assent, much impressed with the fine sentiments of the minister's mother. Phœbe put her handkerchief to her eyes, and Mr Beecher found it was time for his train. "Tell Vincent I am very glad to have been of use to him. We were all delighted in 'Omerton to hear of him making such an 'it," said Mr Beecher, friendly but discomfited. He made his leave-taking all round, before Mrs Vincent, at the height of victory, rose and

went her way. Then she, too, shook hands, and blandly parted with the astonished women. They remained behind, and laid their heads together, much subdued, over this totally new light. She departed, gently victorious. This little demonstration had done her good. When she got out into the street, however, she fell down again into those depths of despair out of which she had risen so bravely for Arthur's sake. She began to plan how she and Susan could go away—not to Lonsdale—never again to Lonsdale—but to some unknown place, and hide their shame-stricken heads. She was so weary and sick in her heart, it was almost a comfort to think of creeping into some corner, taking her poor darling into her arms, healing those dreadful wounds of hers, hiding her from the sight of men. This was what they must do as soon as her dearest child came back—go to Scotland, perhaps, or into the primitive south country, where nobody knew them, or —— but softly, who was this?

A new claim upon the overworked anxious soul. At the door of her son's house stood a carriage—an open carriage—luxurious and handsome, with two fine horses impatiently pawing the air, and a very fine footman at the door, talking to the little maid. Within the carriage, the same beautiful young woman whom Mrs Vincent remembered to have seen waving a lovely hand to Arthur. No doubt it was Lady Western. The

beauty did not bewilder Mrs Vincent as she had bewildered Mrs Vincent's son; but, with a thrill of mingled pride, admiration, and disapproval, she hastened forward at sight of her. Could she be asking for Arthur?—and could Arthur have ventured to love that lovely creature in her radiance of wealth and rank? With a mother's involuntary self-delusion Mrs Vincent looked at the beautiful vision as at Arthur's possible bride, and was proud and displeased at the same moment; proud, that anything so lovely and splendid was to fall to her son's lot—disapproving, that Arthur's chosen should offer a mark of favour even to Arthur, so much more decided than accorded with the widow's old-fashioned notion of what became a woman. Mrs Vincent did not think of the other figure by Lady Western's side—a man of great height, very slight, and rapid in his movements, with a long brown beard, and thoughtful eyes—eyes which lightened up and became as keen as they were dreamy, whenever occasion arose. Why should the widow look at him? She had nothing to do with him. This once in their life they were to come into momentary contact—never more.

"Mr Vincent ain't at home—but oh, look year!—here's his mother as can tell you better nor me," cried the half-frightened maid at the door.

"His mother?" said the beautiful creature in the carriage; she had alighted in a moment, and was by

Mrs Vincent's side—"Oh, I am so glad to see Mr Vincent's mother! I am Lady Western—he has told you of me?" she said, taking the widow's hand; "take us in, please, and let us talk to you—we will not tease you—we have something important to say."

"Important to us—not to Mrs Vincent," said the gentleman who followed her, a remarkable figure, in his loose light-coloured morning dress; and his eyes fell with a remorseful pity upon the widow, standing, drawn-back, and self-restrained, upon the ground of her conscious misery, not knowing whether to hope that they brought her news, or to steel herself into a commonplace aspect of civility. This man had a heart; he looked from the brilliant creature before him, all flushed and radiant with her own happiness, to the little woman by her side, in her pitiful widow's dress, in her visible paleness and desperation of self-control. It was he who had brought Lady Western here to put his own innocence beyond doubt, but the cruelty of that selfish impulse struck him now as he saw them stand together. "Important to us—not to Mrs Vincent," he said again, taking off his hat to her with devout respect.

"Ah, yes! to us," said Lady Western, looking up to him with a momentary gleam of love and happiness. Then the pretty tender-hearted creature changed her look, and composed her countenance into sympathy. "I am so sorry for you, dear Mrs Vincent!" she said,

with the saddest voice. At this the widow on her part started, and was recalled to herself.

"I am a stranger in Carlingford," said the mild little woman, drawing up her tiny figure. "I do not know what has procured me this pleasure—but all my son's friends are welcome to me. I will show you the way up-stairs," she continued, going up before them with the air of dignity which, after the hard battles and encounters and bitter wounds of this day, became the heroic little figure. She sent Mary, who started up in dismay at her entrance, into another room, and gave Lady Western a chair, but herself continued standing, always the conservator of Arthur's honour. If Arthur loved her, who was this man? why did such glances pass between them? Mrs Vincent stood erect before Lady Western, and did not yield even to the winning looks for which poor Arthur would have given his life.

"Oh, dear Mrs Vincent, I am so sorry for you!" said Lady Western again; "I know it all, and it makes my heart bleed to think of it. I will be your friend and your daughter's friend as long as I live, if you will let me. Oh, don't shut your heart against me! Mr Vincent trusts me, and so must you; and I am heartbroken to think all that you must have gone through——"

"Stop!" said Mrs Vincent, with a gasp. "I—I cannot tell—what you mean," she articulated, with

difficulty, holding by the table to support herself, but looking with unflinching eyes in her new persecutor's face.

"Oh, don't shut your heart against me!" cried the young dowager, with genuine tears in her lovely eyes. "This gentleman was with Mr Vincent yesterday—he came up here this morning. He is—Mr Fordham." She broke off abruptly with a terrified cry. But Mrs Vincent had not died or fainted standing rigid there before her, as the soft creature thought. Her eyes had only taken that blank lustreless gaze, because the force of emotion beneath was too much for them, and inexpressible. Even in that extremity, it was in the widow's heart, wrung to desperation, to keep her standing-ground of assumed ignorance, and not to know what this sudden offer of sympathy could mean.

"I do not know—the gentleman," she said, slowly, trying to make the shadow of a curtsy to him. "I am sorry to seem uncivil; but I am tired and anxious. What—what did you want of me?" she asked, in a little outburst of uncontrollable petulance, which comforted Lady Western. It was a very natural question. Surely, in this forlorn room, where she had passed so many wretched hours, her privacy might have been sacred; and she was jealous and angry at the sight of Fordham for Arthur's sake. It was another touch in the universal misery. She looked at Lady Western's

beauty with an angry heart. For these two, who ventured to come to her in their happiness, affronting her anguish, was Arthur's heart to be broken too?

"We wanted—our own ends," said Fordham, coming forward. "I was so cruel as to think of myself, and that you would prove it was another who had assumed my name. Forgive me—it was I who brought Lady Western here; and if either of us can serve you, or your daughter—or your son—" added Fordham, turning red, and looking round at his beautiful companion——

Mrs Vincent could bear it no longer. She made a hasty gesture of impatience, and pointed to the door. "I am not well enough, nor happy enough, to be civil," cried Arthur's mother; "we want nothing—nothing." Her voice failed her in this unlooked-for exasperation. A few bitter tears came welling up hot to her eyes. It was very different from the stupor of agony—it was a blaze of short-lived passion, which almost relieved, by its sense of resentment and indignation, a heart worn out with other emotions. Fordham himself, filled with compunction, led Lady Western to the door; but it was not in the kind, foolish heart of the young beauty to leave this poor woman in peace. She came back and seized Mrs Vincent's trembling hands in her own; she begged to be allowed to stay to comfort her; she would have kissed the widow, who drew back, and,

half fainting with fatigue and excitement, still kept her erect position by the table. Finally, she went away in tears, no other means of showing her sympathy being practicable. Mrs Vincent dropped down on her knees beside the table as soon as she was alone, and leaned her aching, throbbing head upon it. Oh, dreadful lingering day, which was not yet half gone! Unconsciously groans of suffering, low but repeated, came out of her heart. The sound brought Mary, with whom no concealment was possible, and who gave what attendance and what sympathy she might to her mistress's grievous trouble. Perhaps the work of this dreadful day was less hard than the vigil to which the mother had now to nerve her heart.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Was it possible that she had slept? A moment ago and it was daylight—a red sunset afternoon: now the pale half-light, struggling with the black darkness, filled the apartment. She was lying on the sofa where Mary had laid her, and by her side, upon a chair within her reach, was some tea untasted, which Mary must have brought after she had fallen into that momentary slumber. The fire burned brightly, with occasional little outbreaks of flame. Such a silence seemed in the house—silence that crept and shuddered—and to think she should have slept!

The night had found covert in all the corners, so dark they were; but one pale line of light came from the window, and the room had a little ruddy centre in the fire. Mrs Vincent, in the poignant anguish of her awakening, grew superstitious; some other breath—some other presence—seemed in the room besides her own. She called "Mary," but there was no answer. In her excited condition anything was possible—the

bounds of the living world and the possible seemed gone for ever. She might see anything—hear anything—in the calm of her desperation. She got up, and hastily lighted the candle which stood on the table. As she looked over the little light a great cry escaped her. What was it? rising darkly, rising slowly, out of the shadows in which it had been crouching, a huddled indistinct figure. Oh God! not Susan! not her child! As it rose slowly facing her, the widow cried aloud once more, and put her hand over her eyes to shut out the dreadful vision. Ghastly white, with fixed dilated eyes—with a figure dilated and grandiose—like a statue stricken into marble, raised to grandeur—could it be Susan who stood there, without a word, without a movement, only with a blank dark gaze at the horrified woman, who dared not meet those dreadful eyes? When life rallied in Mrs Vincent's horror-stricken heart, she went to the ghastly creature, and put warm arms round it, and called it Susan! Susan! Had it any consciousness at all, this dreadful ghost? had it come from another world? The mother kissed it with lips that woke no answer—held it motionless in her trembling arms. She cried again aloud—a great outcry—no longer fearing anything. What were appearances now? If it was Susan, it was Susan dead whom she held, all unyielding and terrible in her warm human arms.

Mary heard and came with exclamations of terror and sympathy. They got her between them to the fire, and chafed her chill hands and feet. Nobody knew how she had got in, where she had come from; no one was with her—no one had admitted her. She sat a marble woman in the chair where they had placed her, unresistant, only gazing, gazing—turning her awful eyes after her mother. At last she drew some long gasping breaths, and, with a shudder which shook her entire frame, seemed to come to herself. "I am Susan Vincent," said the awful ghost. No tears, nor cries, nor wild pressure of her mother's arms, nor entreaties poured into her cold ear, could extract any other words. Mrs Vincent lost her self-possession: she rushed out of the room for remedies—rung the bell—called for Arthur in a voice of despair—could nobody help her, even in this horrible crisis? When she had roused the house she recollected herself, and shut the door upon the wondering strangers, and returned once more to her hopeless task. "Oh, Mary! what are we to do? Oh, Susan, my child, my darling! speak to your poor mother," cried the widow; but the marble figure in the chair, which was Susan, made no reply. It began to shiver with dreadful trembling fits—to be convulsed with long gasping sobs. "I am—Susan—Susan Vincent"—it said at intervals, with a pitiful iteration. The sight of her daughter in this

frightful condition, coming after all her fatigue and strain of excitement, unnerved Mrs Vincent completely. She had locked the door in her sudden dismay. She was kneeling, clasping Susan's knees—wasting vain adjurations upon her—driven beyond hope, beyond sense, beyond capacity. Little rustic Mary had all the weight of the emergency thrown upon her shoulders. It was she who called to the curious landlady outside to send for the doctor, and who managed to get Susan put into her mother's bed. When they had succeeded in laying her down there, a long interval, that seemed like years, passed before Dr Rider came. The bed was opposite the window, through which the pale rays of the twilight were still trembling. The candle on the other side showed Mrs Vincent walking about the room wringing her hands, now and then coming to the bedside to look at the unconscious form there, rent by those gasping sobs, uttering those dreadful words. Mary stood crying at the foot of the bed. As for the widow, her eyes were tearless—her heart in an intolerable fever of suffering. She could not bear it. She said aloud she could not bear it—she could not bear it! Then she returned again to call vainly upon her child, her child! Her strength had given way—she had spent all her reserves, and had nothing to resist this unexpected climax of misery.

It was quite dark when Dr Rider came. Mary held

the candle for him as he felt Susan's pulse, and examined her wide-open eyes. The doctor knew nothing about her any more than if he had not been a doctor. He said it must have been some dreadful mental shock, with inquiring looks at Mrs Vincent, who began to recover herself. He put back the heavy locks of golden brown hair, which had been loosened down from Susan's head, and said he was afraid there was pressure on the brain. What could he say?—he knew nothing more about it. He left some simple directions, said he would send some medicine, and took Mrs Vincent into a corner to ask what it was. "Some severe mental shock?" asked Dr Rider; but, before she could reply, a cab drove rapidly up to the door, and sounds of a sudden arrival were audible in the house. "Oh, doctor, thank God, my son is come—now I can bear it," said the widow. Dr Rider, who was of a compassionate nature, waited with pitying eyes till the minister should come up, and went to take another look at the patient, relieved to think he could speak to her brother, instead of racking her mother's heart. Mrs Vincent grew calm in the sudden consolation of thinking Arthur at hand. She sat down by the bedside, with her eyes fixed on the door, yearning for her son, the only living creature from whom she could have entire sympathy. Was it necessary that they should speak so loudly as they came up-stairs?—could he be bringing a stranger with him

to Susan's sick-room? Her heart began to beat louder with mingled expectation and displeasure. It was not like Arthur—and there was no sound of his voice in the noise that swept up the stair. She rose up instinctively as the footsteps approached—heavy steps, not like her son's. Then the door was thrown open. It was not Arthur who stood upon the dim threshold. It was a stranger in a rough travelling-coat, excited, resolute, full of his own errand. He made a stride into the room to the bedside, thrusting Mrs Vincent aside, not wittingly, but because she was in his way. Mary stood at the other side with the doctor, holding up the one pale candle, which threw a flickering light upon the marble white figure on the bed, and the utter consternation and surprise in Dr Rider's face. Mrs Vincent, too much alarmed and astonished to offer any resistance, followed the man who had thus entered into her sanctuary of anguish. He knew what he was doing, though nobody else did. He went straight forward to the bed. But the sight of the unconscious figure there appalled the confident stranger. "It is she, sure enough," he said; "are you a doctor, sir? is the lady taken ill? I've come after her every step of the way. She's in my custody now. I'll not give any trouble that I can help, but I must stay here."

Mrs Vincent, who scarcely could endure to hear, and did not understand, rushed forward while he was speak-

ing, and seized him by the arm—"Leave the room!" she cried with sudden passion—"He has made some impudent mistake, doctor. God help me!—will you let my child be insulted? Leave the room, sir—leave the room, I say! This is my daughter, Miss Vincent, lying here. Mary, ring the bell—he must be turned out of the room. Doctor, doctor! you are a man; you will never let my child be insulted because her brother is away."

"What does it mean?" cried Dr Rider—"go outside and I will come and speak to you. Miss Vincent is in a most dangerous state—perhaps dying. If you know her——"

"Know her, doctor! you are speaking of my child," cried Mrs Vincent, who faced the intruder with blazing eyes. The man held his ground, not impertinently, but with steadiness.

"I know her fast enough," he said; "I've tracked her every step of the way; not to hurt the lady's feelings, I can't help what I'm doing, sir. Its murder;—I can't let her out of my sight."

Mrs Vincent clasped her hands together with a grasp of desperation. "What is murder?" she said, in a voice that echoed through the room. The doctor, with an exclamation of horror, repeated the same question. Murder! it seemed to ring through the shuddering house.

"It's hard upon a lady, not to say her mother," said the man, compassionately; "but I have to do my duty. A gentleman's been shot where she's come from. She's the first as suspicion falls on. It often turns out as the one that's first suspected isn't the criminal. Don't fret, ma'am," he added, with a glance of pity, "perhaps it's only as a witness she'll be wanted—but I must stay here. I daren't let her out of my sight."

There was a dreadful pause. Mrs Vincent looked up at the two men before her with a heartrending appeal in her eyes. Would anybody tell her what it meant?—would nobody interfere for Susan? She moaned aloud inarticulate in her voiceless misery. "And Arthur is not here!" was the outcry which at last burst from her heart. She was beyond feeling what this was—her senses were confused with extremity of suffering. She only felt that another blow had been dealt at her, and that Arthur was not here to help to bear it. Then the stranger, who had put himself so horribly in possession of Susan's sick-room, once more began to speak. The widow could not tell what he said—the voice rang in her ears like a noise of unmeaning sound, but it stirred her to a flush of female passion, as violent as it was shortlived. She sprang forward and took hold of his arm with her white little trembling hand: "Not here—not here!" cried the mother in her passion. With her feeble force excited into some-

thing irresistible, she put the astonished stranger out of the room before he knew what she was doing. If an infant had done it the man could not have been more utterly astonished. Outside, the people of the house were standing in an excited group. She thrust the dreadful messenger of justice out with those hands that shook with tremors of anguish and weakness. She shut the door upon him with all her feeble strength, locked it, put a chair against it; then she stumbled and fell as she stretched out for another—fell down upon her knees, poor soul! and remained so, forgetting, as it seemed, how she came there, and gradually, by instinct, putting together the hands which trembled like leaves in the wind—"Lord, Lord!" cried the mother, hovering on the wild verge between passion and insensibility. She called Him by name only as utter anguish alone knows how; she had nothing to tell Him; she could only call upon Him by His name.

Dr Rider took the half-insensible form up in his arms and carried her to the bedside, where Susan still lay motionless with her eyes wide open, in an awful abstraction and unconsciousness. He put Mrs Vincent tenderly into the chair, and held the hands that shook with that palsied irrestrainable tremor. "No one can bring her to life but you," said the doctor, turning the face of the miserable mother towards her child. She has kept her senses till she reached you;

when she was here she no longer wanted them; she has left her life in your hands." He held those hands fast as he spoke; pressed them gently, but firmly; repeated his words over again. "In your hands," said the doctor once more, struck to his heart with horror and pity. Susan's bare beautiful arm lay on the coverlid, white, round, and full, like marble. The doctor, who had never seen the fair Saxon girl who was Mrs Vincent's daughter a week ago, thought in his heart that this full developed form and face, rapt to grandeur by the extremity of woe, gave no contradiction to the accusation he had just heard with so much horror. That week had obliterated Susan's soft girlish innocence and the simplicity of her eighteen years. She was a grand form as she lay there upon that bed—might have loved to desperation—fallen—killed. Unconsciously he uttered aloud the thought in his heart—"Perhaps it would be better she should die!"

Then the mother rose. Once more her painful senses came back to the woman who was still the minister's mother, and, even in this hideous dream of misery, had not forgotten the habits of her life. "When my son comes he will settle it all," said Mrs Vincent. "I expect him—any time—he may come any minute. Some one has made—a mistake. I don't know what that man said; but he has made—a mistake, doctor.

My son, Mr Vincent, will see to all that. It has nothing to do with us. Tell me what we are to do for my child. Cut off her hair? Oh, yes, yes, anything! I don't mind it, though it is a sacrifice. She has had—a—a great fright, doctor. She could not tell me particulars. When her brother comes home, we will hear all—" said the widow, looking with a jealous gaze in his eyes to see if he believed her. The scene altogether overcame Dr Rider. He turned away and went to the other side of the room, and took a glass of water from the table before he could answer her or meet that appeal. Then he soothed her as he best could with directions about Susan. He went away immediately to come back in an hour, if perhaps there might be any change—so he said; but, in reality, he wanted to escape, to hear this dreadful story, to think what was best. Friendless, with nobody near to protect them, and the officer of justice waiting at the door, what were these women to do? perhaps death waited closer than the visible messenger of fate. Would it be well to stay that more merciful executioner on his way?

The doctor found the officer outside the door, waiting, not without pity, at his post. He heard what was this man's version of the strange tragedy—strange, and yet not unfamiliar to human ears. The young woman had been betrayed and ruined. In wild ven-

geance and misery she had seized one of her seducer's pistols and shot him through the head—such was the story. And now she had fled from the scene of the murder, tracked step by step by the avenger. The whole house was in a tumult, as may be supposed. The indignant landlady, who was a member of Salem, could scarcely be prevented going into the jealously-closed room and turning out the unhappy criminal. Another lodger, a nervous woman, had already collected her goods to fly from the place. Outside, some mysterious instinct had collected a few people about the door of the hitherto irreproachable house, which imagination magnified into a crowd. Already Tozer had set out from his shop, red with anger, to inquire into this incipient excitement, which nobody could explain. And still Arthur had not appeared to stand by the miserable women in this horrible climax of fate.

When the doctor went back to the room where Susan was, he found Mrs Vincent in a state of agitated activity. Mary and she were flitting about the room, moving lights before Susan's eyes, making what noises they could with the furniture, keeping a fantastic commotion about the bed. "She stirred, doctor, and we were trying to rouse her," said the widow, who had put everything but Susan's bodily extremity from her eyes at the moment. The doctor, who was desperate,

and whose heart was moved, resorted to desperate measures. He gathered them about the bed, set Mrs Vincent to support the insensible form, and raising that white marble arm which had developed into such glorious proportion, touched the swollen blue vein with his lancet. The touch acted like magic. In another moment she had struggled up out of her mother's grasp, and thrown out the arm, from which the blood flowed, up above her head: the crimson stream caught her wild eye as she raised her arm in the air. A convulsive shudder shook her frame. She threw herself over on her face with a cry of horror, far more than a match, in her strength of youth and passion, for the agitated arms that held her. "Mother, mother, mother! it is his blood! it is his life!" cried that despairing voice. The confused bed, the convulsed frame, the flowing blood, all pitifully lighted up by Mary's candle, made up of themselves a scene like murder; and Dr Rider vainly tried to forget the dreadful words which forced upon his mind their untimely testimony. He shuddered at the touch of that white woman's hand as he bound up the wounded arm. He withdrew his eyes from the pallid grandeur of the stricken face. In spite of himself, horror mingled with his pity. A heavier stain was upon her than those crimson traces on her pearly skin. Other words followed in an incoherent stream. Fever of the heart

and brain, burning up into consuming frenzy, had seized upon this lost creature, who was no longer a girl or innocent. Ere long they had to send for nurses, to restrain her delirium. She, raving with a wild madness which betrayed in every wandering exclamation the horror upon her soul, lay desperate in the room which had enclosed for so many lingering hours her mother's anguish of suspense and fear. In an adjoining room, the man who had followed her to this refuge still waited, watchful yet pitiful, intent that his prisoner should not escape him. While outside a few gazers lingered, looking up at the lights in the windows, with a strange perception that something unusual had happened, though nobody knew what it was. Such was the scene upon which Arthur Vincent, not unwarned, yet incredulous, came suddenly with eyes of horror and wild indignation as he reached his own door.

CHAPTER XXIV.

When Vincent was set down, in the darkness and silence of the Sunday night, in the Dover railway station, it was some minutes before he could collect himself, and understand where he was. He had fallen into a feverish sleep during the journey, little as he could have supposed himself capable of sleeping at such a moment; but he was young, and unused to the ceaseless fatigue and excitement and total want of rest which had obliterated for him the natural distinction between night and day. While his fellow-passengers trooped away with all the bustle and excitement of travellers, who had then only completed the first stage of their journey, to the pier and the night-boat which waited to carry them across the Channel, he, whom various porters and attendants stimulated with adjurations to make haste, and warnings that he would be late, stumbled out into the dark, collecting his faculties, and trying to think what he must do first. He was

giddy and feverish with that insufficient snatch of sleep which had lost him the time in which he might have been laying his plans. But when he got outside the station into the unknown place, into the gloom of night, and heard the "moanings of the homeless sea" sounding sullen against the unseen shore, recollection and energy came back to him. That very sound, booming through the darkness, inspired Susan's brother. He thought of her forlorn, desolate, succourless, a weary wanderer seeking rest and finding none, shrouded up in darkness and danger, lost in the mysterious gloom—such was the sentiment of the night. The minister went on rapidly to the town, with its restless lights, through which everybody seemed to be passing towards the unseen sea. Should he follow with the stream, or should he stop at the hotel of which Mary had told him? He quickened his steps as he reached the open door of the inn, and plunged in to make rapid inquiries. Nobody knew either Colonel Mildmay or Mr Fordham, but the party which he described had been there, and had left only an hour before—not for the boat, the attendants thought: but the boat was ringing its bells through the night; and if by chance they had gone there, no time was to be lost. He rushed from the inn as fast as his wearied limbs could carry him to the pier, where the lookers-on stood aside out of his way, recognising his excitement.

He went through among all the passengers with the rough captain and his lantern, having briefly explained to that functionary what he wanted. But they were not there. When he had satisfied himself, he left the boat, and stood with suspicious reluctance, unwilling to lose sight of it, on the pier, and watched the coloured lamp on the mast of the steamer gradually gliding through the darkness out of the sheltering harbour, till it began to plunge and heave on the unseen sea. Then he took his troubled way back to the inn. It was very late, and all the population seemed to disappear out of the streets, with the little attendant crowd which had been waiting upon the last event of the day, the departure of this night-boat. The inn itself looked half asleep, and was half closed when he returned. No further arrivals, no incidents in the shape of trains or boats, were to be looked for till the morning. It was the first time that Arthur had encountered this compulsory pause of night. He struggled against it for some time, questioning the waiters, and gleaning some particulars which did but increase his anxiety; but the waiters themselves were sleepy, and all the world around had closed itself up in utter quietness and rest.

Vincent went out again, but he could get admittance nowhere, save at the office of the police, where he went in desperation to ask the services of some

one skilful in such inquiries. He found this not without difficulty, but nothing was to be done that night. He had to go back to the hotel to consent to the necessary rest for which, notwithstanding the fever of his mind, his worn-out frame craved. Weariness, indeed, had gradually overpowered and absorbed him—stronger than anxiety, more urgent even than his love for his sister, was this present and overpowering exhaustion which began to occupy all his thoughts. Though he struggled with it he could not but feel in his heart, with a certain guilt, how this overwhelming desire to throw himself down somewhere and rest possessed him to the exclusion of more worthy impulses. After he had ordered some refreshment, of which, indeed, he stood as much in need, the young man threw himself upon a sofa, and there fell into a deep sleep of utter weariness. He could do no more. He slept as youth must sleep, were it on the edge of a precipice, were it at the deathbed of its dearest friend. The very waiter who brought in the food he had ordered, took pity upon the worn-out slumberer. The man heaped up the fire, and covered Vincent with his railway wrapper before he withdrew; and it was not till morning that the young minister awoke out of that profound slumber—awoke chilled and aching, and confused, in the dark, with the untouched meal still on the table, the candle flaming in its socket, and

he himself totally unaware how long he had been asleep. In the interval that elapsed before the first sounds of awakening life in the house, he had time to collect himself, and when he went down-stairs to the coffee-room, still in the dark of the winter morning, had regained more command of himself and his powers than at any previous moment since this misery came upon him.

But it was still so early that the fire was scarcely alight, and he had to wait for the cup of coffee he ordered. Vincent went to the window, as was natural—a large window looking into the dark street, faintly lighted with lamps, which somehow burned less bright in the chill of the morning than they did at night. Looking out vaguely, yet with the vigilance of anxiety, without being able to discriminate anything except here and there a dark figure passing in the darkness, the young man waited with his face close to the uncurtained panes. There was nothing in that blank undecipherable street to interest him, and yet he gazed out mechanically in the anxious pre-occupation of his mind. When the attendant came into the room with his coffee, his attention was temporarily distracted. He got up to go to the table where breakfast was being arranged for him; but, as he rose, his eye was caught by the gleam of a passing face, ghastly white in the darkness, looking in. Before he

could draw breath, the apparition was gone. Without saying a word to the astonished waiter, who began to think him mad, Vincent dashed out after this vanished vision. Two female figures were visible a little further on in the gloomy street. He pursued them with breathless, noiseless speed, and grasped at the arm of a terrified woman who, gasping with sudden fright, turned upon him a face he had never seen before. Nobody else was to be seen in any direction. The minister made an inarticulate apology, and turned back to search for some opening or passage through which that face could have disappeared. It was no fancy of his that painted that pale countenance upon the darkness—the same face that he had seen in the railway carriage following Colonel Mildmay—the same, but with a new look of horror and desperation in its eyes. The young man investigated, as he thought, every doorway, every corner which could have given shelter to such a fugitive. He returned, excited and agitated, to the inn, to ask if there was any passage through the line of houses which he might have overlooked, but could hear of none. It was on his lips to ask if they had heard of any crime or accident during the night—any—murder; but prudence restrained the incautious utterance. He went out with the wildest agitation in his mind; something had happened. Mrs Hilyard's face, gleaming in unconscious at the window,

betrayed to him much more clearly than any confession, that some new and awful event had been added to that woman's strange experiences of life ; and in the darkness he had been aware of some shadowy figure beside her, accompanying her ghostly way. Perhaps her child —perhaps—could it be Susan ? The young man went out, not knowing where he went, into the darkness of the winter morning ; he hastened to the pier, to the railway, startling the half-awakened people about, but nowhere could either see or hear of her. Could it be a delusion ? but the wildest imagination in the world could not have inspired with such a new horror of expression the eyes that gleamed out of that ghastly pale face.

The grey daylight had just got final mastery of the dark, when Vincent met the man whom he had employed the night before to help him in his inquiries. This agent, more skilful than the minister, had found out the cab-driver who conveyed the party from the hotel on the previous evening. Colonel Mildmay seemed to have made the precipitate retreat of a man suddenly startled and frightened out of his plans. The cabman gave a detailed account of the strange conduct of his fare. "We was a-going to the pier to the Ostend steamer, sir," said the driver, "when I was pulled up sharp, and got my directions to turn about sudden and go to the railway. There was a lady as I

see keeping her eye on us, a-standing by the pier gates with her bag in her hand; but it was dark, and she couldn't have seen who was in the cab. The same occurred, sir, as we came up to the railway. I don't say as I see the lady there—but sure enough I was pulled up second time, and ordered out along the Folkestone road, a matter o' three mile or so. Then I was turned back again; and the end of all was that I took them to the Swan in Walmer Street, as is a place where there's well-aired beds and chops, and that style o' thing. That ain't the style of thing as is done in the Lord Warden. To take a fare, and partic'lar along with ladies, from the one of them places to the other, looks queer—that's what it does; it looks very queer, sir. It made me take a deal of notice. Gen'leman tall, light-haired, hook nose, awful swell to look at. Ladies, one on 'em pretty tall, one little; pretty creatures, but dreadful skeared as far as I could see. The little one had a blue veil. That's them, sir; thought as I was right."

"And you can take me to the place?" said Vincent.

"Jump into my cab, and I'll have you there, sir, in five minutes," said the man.

The minister sprang into the cab alone. He no longer wanted the aid of a stranger; the darkling streets seemed to glide past him, and not he past them, as he dashed on at last to find his sister, this time there could be no mistake. After they had threaded

several obscure streets, the driver came to a sudden pause, got off his box, and touched his hat with an alarmed look. "I can't drive up to the very 'ouse, sir—there's a crowd around the door; they do say as something has happened. I hope it ain't to any of your friends?" said the cabman. Vincent flung the door open as he was speaking, and rushed out. A horrified and excited crowd was besieging the door of the shabby public-house to which he had been brought. Seeing his hasty arrival, and the passionate anxiety in his eyes, the crowd gave way before him, recognising his right of entry; the very policeman at the door yielded to him in the force of his passion. "What is it?" he cried, aware of putting away some women and babies from the door with mechanical kindness, but unconscious that he had stumbled up the steps like a man in a dream, and was demanding an answer to his question with an almost wild vehemence. The question was answered by a dozen eager voices. It was murder—murder! He could make out nothing but the word in the confusion of many speakers and of his own mind. Nobody opposed his entrance or asked what business he had there. He sprang up the stairs in two or three steps, pressed forward to a half-open door, within which he saw some people assembled, and, unawares thrusting aside a man who stopped him, went into that chamber of death. Several people were around the bed—one, a

surgeon, occupied with the prostrate figure there. Vincent, over the heads of the spectators, gazed with burning eyes at this horrible spectacle. Susan herself, whom he did not expect to find there, nor could associate in any way with such a scene, faded out of his mind as he gazed with haggard face and horror-stricken soul at the shattered head, bound up in bloody bandages, scarce recognisable except by sharp eyes of love or hate, which rested on that mean pillow. He asked no questions for the moment. To him alone the business needed no explanation. He was not even surprised—he stood gazing in a momentary trance of horror at the lamentable sight. It was a wretched room, shabby and meagre, such a place as only terror could have driven Mildmay to. Villain as he was, his punishment had begun before that pistol-shot brought it to a climax—even in his success he had been conscious that she would keep her word.

The policeman at the door touched Vincent on the sleeve, just as he turned from the dreadful spectacle before him. "Nobody is allowed in here but for a good reason," said this man, gazing suspiciously at the stranger; "unless you knows something about it, or have come to identify the poor gentleman, or are of some use somehow, I can't let you stay here."

"I do not wish to stay here," said Vincent, turning away with a shudder. "I want to see the ladies who

were with him. Yes, I know who he is—but I am not a friend of his; I have nothing to do with the matter. Where are the ladies who were with him? Miss Vincent," said the minister with a pang, "and—and Miss Mildmay. I have come to take them away."

"The ladies as were with him? Oh, it's them as you're awanting; perhaps you'll stop a minute and talk to the inspector," said the policeman. "The ladies as were with him? Maybe you can tell the inspector something as will help justice? You didn't know the reason as brought out two young women a-travelling with a gen'leman, did you? They'll want all the friends they can collect afore all's done. You come this way with me."

It was a relief to get out of sight of that which horrified yet fascinated his eyes. Vincent followed the man into another room without observing the evident suspicion with which he was regarded. "Where are they?" he asked again. "I have a cab below. This is not a place for women. I have come to take them away. Where are the people of the house? What do you mean by keeping your hand on me? I want Miss Vincent. Do you hear me? I have nothing to do with Colonel Mildmay. He has plenty of friends to avenge him. I want my sister. Where is she? Call the people of the house."

Vincent threw off the policeman's hand from his

arm, and, looking for a bell, rang violently. He was too much horror-stricken, and too secure of finding Susan, weeping and helpless in some corner, to show any of the passionate eagerness with which he had started on his search. Little doubt she was there, poor lost soul. He shrank from meeting with her, now that the meeting was so near; and his thoughts went after that other desperate wretched woman, flying—who could tell where?—in despair and darkness. The house was in utter disorder, as was natural; none of its humble occupants being capable, at the present exciting moment, of attending to their usual duties. Vincent rang the bell again, till it pealed and echoed through the place. Then he bethought himself, with a natural shudder, of the death-chamber close by. He turned to the man by his side, with an instinctive involuntary curiosity. "Is any one suspected?" said the minister, feeling his face grow pale with a dreadful consciousness of the secret which he shared. But before he could hear the answer, his second summons had brought up the terrified mistress of the house, attended half way up the stair by a throng of curious women. He went hurriedly to meet her at the door.

"Where are the ladies?" said the minister. "I have just heard that my sister was brought here last night. Tell her I am here. Take me to her. Don't be alarmed. You know what I mean? The two ladies—

young ladies who came here with Colonel Mildmay last night—where are they? Good heavens! do you not understand what I mean?"

"The young ladies, sir?" faltered the landlady, gasping and looking at the man who still kept by Vincent's side. "Oh, Lord bless us! The young ladies——"

"Make haste and let them know I am here," said Vincent, gradually growing more and more anxious. "I will undertake to produce them if they are wanted as witnesses. Where are they?—where is my sister? I tell you she is my sister. I have come for her. Tell Miss Vincent. Surely I am speaking plain English," said the young man, with a flush of sudden dread. "The elder one, Miss Vincent—you understand me? Let her know that I am here."

"His sister! Oh, Lord bless us; and he don't know no more than the unborn," cried the woman of the house. "Oh, Lord! p'liceman, can't you tell the poor gentleman? His sister! oh, that's worse than ever, that is. Some poor young thing as has been beguiled and led astray. Lord bless us! don't look at me o' that way. I ain't to blame. Oh, gracious me, that I should have to tell the gentleman, and you standing there! Oh, sir, it's her as has done it. She's gone away from here afore break of day. I don't blame her; oh, I don't blame her; don't look o' that

dreadful way at me. He's drove her to it with bad usage. She'll have to suffer for it; but I don't blame her. I don't blame her if it was my last word in life."

Vincent felt his tongue cleave to his mouth. He was stunned; he did not know what he said—what he was hearing. "Blame her? whom? for what?" he said, with a mechanical effort. He seemed to himself to be suddenly engulfed in some horrible cloud, but he did not know what it meant.

"Oh, Lord! don't look o' that dreadful way at me; she's gone off from here as soon as she done it," cried the woman. "She had that much sense left, poor soul. He's drove her mad; he's drove her to it. My man says it can't be brought in no worse than manslaughter——"

"You don't understand me," Vincent broke in; "you are talking of the criminal. Who are you talking of?—but it does not matter. I want Miss Vincent. Do you hear me?—the young lady whom he brought here last night. Where is my sister? Gone away before daybreak! You mean the criminal, but I want my sister. Susan! take me to where she is. She had nothing to do with it. I will give you anything—pay you anything, only take me to where she is."

He moved towards the door as he spoke, half believing that, if he could but hold out and refuse to

credit this horror, Susan might still be found. "Lord bless us! the poor young gentleman's gone out of his senses," cried the landlady. "Let him go through all the house if that's what he wants. There ain't nothing to conceal in my house. I'll take you to the room as they were in—she and the other one. This way, sir. They hadn't nothing with them but two little bags, so there wasn't much to leave; but such as it is, being her night-things, is there. She wasn't thinking of bags, nor any of her little comforts, when she went away. Here, sir; walk in here."

The woman took him to a room up-stairs, where Vincent followed her mechanically. The room had evidently been occupied a very short time before. Upon a chair, open, with the contents only half thrust in, was a travelling-bag, which the minister recognised at once—a piece of family property dreadful to see in such a place. Susan had been putting her things away with the orderly instinct of her mother's daughter when this sudden shock of terror came upon her. "Do you mean to tell me that it is she who has gone away," said Vincent, with a look of incredulous wonder and appeal—"she—Susan Vincent, my sister? Take time to think. It was not *she*—somebody else. Tell me where she is——"

"Oh, sir, don't say anything as may come against her," cried the landlady. "It's nobody but her, poor

soul, poor soul. If it was possible to think as it could be another, I would—but there was nobody else to do it. As soon as we heard the shot and the groan the master got up. He met her on the stair, sir, if you'll believe me, like a woman as was walking in her sleep. He was that struck he daren't say a word to her. He let her pass by him and go out at the door—and when he went into the gentleman's room and found him there a-dying, she was gone clean off, and couldn't be heard of. Folks say as my husband should have stopped her, but it wasn't none of his business. Oh, sir, don't say nothing as'll put them on her track! There's one man gone off after her already—oh, it's dreadful!—if you'll be advised by me, you'll slip out the back way, and don't come across that policeman again. If she did kill him," cried the weeping landlady, "it was to save herself, poor dear. I'll let you out the back way, if you'll be guided by me."

The horror of this accusation had come home to Vincent's mind at last. He saw, as if by a sudden flash of dreadful enlightenment, not guilt indeed, or its awful punishment, but open shame—the disgrace of publicity — the horrible suspicions which were of themselves more than enough to kill the unhappy girl. He made a great effort to speak, but could not for the moment. He thrust in the white soft garments which were hanging out of it, into that

familiar bag, which somehow gave him a pang more acute than all the terrible news he was hearing. He had travelled with it himself on innocent boyish journeys, had seen it in his mother's innocent hands—and now to find it in this shuddering atmosphere of crime and mystery! He too shuddered as he roused himself to speak. "Hush—hush," said Vincent, "you mistake, my sister has nothing to do with it; I—I can prove that—easily," said the minister, getting the words out with difficulty. "Tell me how it all happened—when they came here, what passed; for instance——" He paused, and his eye caught another evidence of the reality of his horrible position. It was the blue veil which he had followed and described, and looked for through all these weary hours. He took it up in his hand, crushing it together with an almost ungovernable impulse of rage, from where it had been thrown down on the shabby carpet. "For instance," said Susan's brother, restraining himself, "where is the girl who wore this? You said Miss Vincent went away alone—where was the other? was she left behind—is she here?"

The policeman had followed them up into the room in natural curiosity and suspicion. The landlady's husband had sworn that Susan left the house by herself. Then, where was the girl? The fugitive had been tracked to the railway, the policeman said; but she was alone. Nobody had thought before of her helpless

companion. The inspector arrived while they were going over the house trying if it were possible to find any traces of this forlorn creature. Vincent was much too profoundly concerned himself to keep silence about the mysterious movements of the woman whom he had seen on his way to Dover—whom he had seen that very morning in the darkness—whom he knew to be the bitterest enemy of the murdered man. It was only when he described her—when he tried to collect all the information he had ever had about her for the guidance of justice—that he saw how little he knew of her in reality. His very description was tinged with a touch of fancy; and in this frightful emergency he perceived, for the first time, how much his imagination had supplied of the interest he felt in this woman. When he had done all it was possible to do to set the pursuer on her track, and gathered all he could of the supposed proofs against Susan, he left the place where he could do nothing further. He had to describe himself fully —to prove his identity by a reference to the Dissenting minister of the place, and explain whence he had come and whither he was going, before the officers in charge of the house, although conscious that they had no grounds for detaining him, would let him go. But he was permitted to leave at last. While he waited for the next train to Carlingford, he questioned the cabman, who could give but a very faint and indistinct

description of the lady whom he had seen at the pier-gates, whose appearance had stopped Colonel Mildmay in the prosecution of his journey. She was standing under a lamp, the man said: the gentleman might see her, but he didn't think as she could see him; but dim as the vision was, this was another little link in the chain of evidence. If it did but vindicate Susan—save her, not from the penalty, but from the very shadow and suspicion of such a horror! It was this which filled the minister's mind with every sort of frightful apprehension. To have Susan's name exposed to such a horrible publicity—to have such a scene, such a crime anyhow connected with his sister—the idea shook Vincent's mind utterly, and almost disabled him from thought at all. And where was she, poor horror-stricken fugitive? He scarcely dared hope that she had gone to her mother. Sudden death, madness, any misery, seemed possible to have overtaken the unhappy girl thus suddenly reft out of the peacefulness of her youth into circumstances so horrible. When he entered Carlingford, late at night, it was with insupportable pangs of suspense and alarm that he looked into the faces he met on the lighted streets. Were they looking at him already with a consciousness that some frightful shadow enveloped him? Tozer's shop was already shut—earlier than usual, surely—and two or three people stood talking at the open door, clearly

visible against the gaslight, which still burned bright within. Farther up, opposite his own house, two or three passengers had stopped to look up at the lighted windows. When Vincent thrust aside a lad who happened to be in his way, asking, with uncontrollable irritation, what he wanted there, the door opened suddenly at the sound of his voice. All was excited and confused within — common life, with its quiet summonses and answers, was over there. Wild confusion, agitation, reproach, surrounded the unfortunate minister. His landlady came forward to meet him, to bewail her own misfortune, and upbraid him with the wrong he had done her. "I took in the pastor for a lodger, because he was sure to be steady and respectable, and this is what he has brought to me!" cried the hysterical woman. "What is the meaning of all this?" cried Vincent, looking round him with restrained fury; but he did not wait for an answer. He went up to his rooms to know the worst. As he rushed breathless up-stairs, loud outcries of delirium reached him. In his horror and anguish he could not recognise the voice—was it his mother who had given way under the terrible burden? He dashed open the door of the sitting-room in which he had spent so many quiet hours—neither mother nor sister were there; instead of them a rough-featured man, in a blue travelling-coat, and Tozer, flushed and argumentative, standing by the

table. Vincent had not time to ask what the controversy was that was going on between the two. The butterman grasped his hand with an almost violent pressure, and took the stranger's arm. "Beg your pardon for being in your room, Mr Vincent, but me and this gentleman has a little business. I'll be back presently and explain," said the good deacon, with a compassionate look at the young man, whose weary eyes sought with instinctive suspicion that unknown face. "I'm your friend, Mr Vincent—I always was; I'm not one as will desert a friend in trouble," said Tozer, with another shake of his hand, lowering his voice. Then he disappeared with his strange companion. The minister was alone with those cries, with this agitation. He threw himself down in momentary despair. The worst, it appeared, had happened—the horror had travelled before him. He gave up everything in the anguish of that moment. There seemed to be no use for any further struggle. To this sensitive, spotless, inexperienced household, suspicion was worse than death.

CHAPTER XXV.

When Vincent came to himself, and began to see clearly the true horrors of his position, his mind, driven to its last stronghold, rallied convulsively to meet the worst. It was Susan who was raving close by; but her brother, in the sickening despair of his heart, had not the courage to go into that agitated sick-room. He sat waiting for Tozer's return with a sense of helplessness, a sense of irritation, against which he had no strength to contend. In that bitter moment he gave up everything, and felt himself no longer capable of striving against his fate. He felt in his heart that all Carlingford must already be discussing the calamity that had come upon him, and that his innocent honourable name was already sullied by the breath of the crowd; and, with a strange mixture of intolerance and eagerness, he waited the return of the man who had first, as it appeared, thrust himself into the secret—a man whom the minister must not affront,

must not defy, on peril of all he had in the world. These few silent moments were more terrible to Vincent than any that had gone before them. Was it any good holding out, attempting to keep a brave face to the world, struggling against this crushing blow?—or would it not be easiest to give in, to drop the useless arms, to fly from the inevitable downfall? Some corner of the earth there surely remained where he could hide his head and find a shelter for the two poor women who were greater sufferers than he. It was with such feelings that he awaited the return of Tozer—feelings aggravated by the consciousness that somehow the butterman was engaged in his service at this very moment, and by a shadowy and unexpressed suspicion in his mind as to the character of the stranger whom Tozer had taken away. The excellent deacon returned at last with looks of conscious importance. He was very sorry and anxious, but he could not help looking confidential, and standing a little higher upon the ground of this mystery, which nobody shared but himself. Once more he shook hands with Vincent, sympathetically, and with a grasp full of meaning.

"The thing for us to do is to keep it quiet—to keep it quiet, sir," said Tozer, lowering his voice as he spoke. "Nothing must be said about it—no more nor can be helped, Mr Vincent. As far as it has gone, there's nobody as has heard but me. If it could be kept pri-

vate from the Salem folks," continued the butterman, taking a seat at the table, and looking cautiously round him, as if to make sure that no one was within hearing, "it would be for the best. Them women do make such a talk about everything. Not to tell a falsehood, sir, as I wouldn't, not to save my own, if so be as my own could be in such a position—we'll say as your sister's took bad, sir, that's what we'll say. And no lie neither—hear to her, poor soul!—But, Mr Vincent," said Tozer, drawing closer, and confiding his doubt in a whisper, "what she says is best not to be listened to, if you'll take my advice. It ain't to be built upon what a poor creature says in a fever, but them sort of words and screechings don't come out of nothing but a troubled mind. She was aggravated awful—so the man tells me."

"Who was the man?" asked Vincent, hurriedly.

"The man? oh!—which man was you meaning, sir?" asked Tozer, with a little fright, recurring to his more generous intention of keeping this intruder altogether from the knowledge of the minister; "nobody in particular, Mr Vincent—nobody as is worth mentioning. One as was sent to inquire—that's all. I've cleared him away out of the road," said the butterman, not without some natural complacency: "there ain't no matter about him. Don't ask me no more, Mr Vincent, for it's losing time as is precious. If there's any-

thing as can be done, it's best to do it directly. I'd speak to John Brown as is the cleverest attorney in Carlingford, sir, if I was you. She's young, and, as I was saying, she was aggravated awful. She might be got off."

"Hush!" said Vincent, who had to put a desperate curb upon himself, lest the restrained rage with which he heard this implication of guilt should burst out; "you think there is something in this horrible business —that my sister has something to do with it. It is all a frightful delusion—an infernal——"

"Mr Vincent, sir, you mustn't swear. I'm as sorry for you as a man can be; but you're a minister, and you mustn't give way," said Tozer. "If there ain't nothing in it, so much the better; but I'm told as the evidence is clean again' her. Well, I won't say no more; it's no pleasure to me to think of a young creature, and a minister's daughter, with a mother like what she's got, going any ways astray—far the contrary, Mr Vincent: your own father, if he was living, couldn't be more sorry than me. But my advice is, keep quiet, and don't let anything get out no more nor can be helped. I don't mean to say as it can be altogether kep' quiet—that ain't in the nature of things; nor I don't mean to make you suppose as all is likely to go smooth, and no fault found. There's pretty sure to be some unpleasantness, one way or

another; and the only thing as I can see is just to put up with it, and stand your ground, and do your duty all the same. And I for one will stand by you, sir," said Tozer, rising to his feet with a little glow of conscious generosity and valour, and shaking the hand of the poor young minister with cordial kindness—"I'll stand by you, sir, for one, whatever happens; and we'll tide it out, Mr Vincent, that's what we'll do, sir, if you can but hold on."

"Thank you," said poor Vincent, moved to the heart—"thank you. I dare not think how it is all to end, but thank you all the same; I shall not forget what you say."

"And tell your mother," continued Tozer, swelling to a little triumph in his own magnanimity—"tell your mother as I said so; tell her as I'll stand by you through thick and thin; and we'll pull through, we'll pull through!" said the butterman, slowly disappearing, with a face radiant with conscious bounty and patronage, through the open door.

Vincent had followed him with an instinct of civility and gratitude. Just as Tozer withdrew, a fresh burst of outcry came from the sick-room, ringing through the excited house. The deacon turned round half-way down the stair, held up his hands, listened, and made a movement of wondering pity towards the closed door which hid Susan, but did not keep in her cries.

The wretched minister drew back from that compassionate gesture as if some one had struck him a blow. He went back and threw himself down on the sofa, and covered his face with his hands. The pity and the patronage were the last drop of humiliation in his bitter cup. Hot tears came to his eyes ; it seemed to him more than flesh and blood could bear.

Some time elapsed, however, before Vincent had the courage to meet his mother. When those dreadful outcries sank into exhaustion, and all for the moment was quiet in the sick-room, he sent to tell her he had arrived, and went to the dreadful door which she kept closed so jealously. He was afraid to meet her eye when she came to him, and noiselessly drew him within. Judging by himself, he had not ventured to think what his mother's horror and despair would be. But Mrs Vincent put her arms round her son with an exclamation of thanksgiving. "Oh, Arthur! thank God, you are come. Now I shall be able to bear it," cried his mother. She cried a little upon his breast, and then wiped her eyes and looked up at him with quivering lips. "Oh, Arthur, what my poor darling must have come through!" said Mrs Vincent, with a wistful appeal to him in her tender eyes. She said nothing of the darker horror. It lay upon her soul a frightful, inarticulate shadow ; but in the mean time she could only think of Susan and her fever—that

fever which afforded a kind of comfort to the mother —a proof that her child had not lost her innocence lightly, but that the shock had been to Susan a horrible convulsion, shaking earth and heaven. The mother and son went together to the bedside to look at the unhappy cause of all their sorrows—she clinging with her tender hand to his arm, wistful now, and afraid in the depths of her heart lest Arthur, who was only a man, might be hard upon Susan in her terrible abasement. It was more than a year since Vincent had seen his sister. Was it Susan? The grandeur of the stricken form, the features sublimed and elevated, the majestic proportions into which this awful crisis of fate had developed the fair-haired girl of Lonsdale, struck her brother with unspeakable awe and pity. Pity and awe; but yet another feeling mingled in the wonder with which he gazed upon her. A thrill of terror came over him. That frightful, tropical blaze of passion, anguish, and woe which had produced this sudden development, had it developed no unknown qualities in Susan's heart? As she lay there in the majesty of unconsciousness, she resembled more a woman who could avenge herself, than a soft girl, the sudden victim of a bad man. Vincent turned away from the bed with an involuntary shudder. He would not, could not, look at her again: he left his mother to her unceasing vigil, and himself went to his own

room, to try if rest were possible. Rest was not easy in such a terrible complication of affairs; but weariness is omnipotent with youth. He did sleep by snatches, in utter fatigue and exhaustion—slept long enough to secure for himself the unspeakable torture of waking to the renewed horror of a new day.

CHAPTER XXVI.

NEXT morning the minister rose to the changed life and world which now surrounded his way, if not with much less excitement, at least with a more familiar knowledge of all the troubles which encompassed him. As he sat over the pretended breakfast, for which he had no appetite, and not even heart enough to make a show of eating, hearing close by the voice of his sister's delirium, sometimes in faint murmurs, sometimes rising into wild outcries of passion, and pondered all the circumstances of this frightful calamity, it is not wonderful that his heart fainted within him. He had found out quickly enough that it was an officer of justice whom Tozer had succeeded, by what means he could not tell, in removing from his house. His landlady knew all the facts sufficiently well to be by times reproachful and by times sympathetic. The other lodgers in the house, some of whom had already left for fear of pollution, were equally aware of all the circumstances of the case; and it was impossible

to hope that a tale so exciting, known to so many, could be long of spreading. The minister seemed to himself to look ruin in the face, as he sat in profound dejection, leaning his head in his hands. He had committed his sister's interests into the hands of the best attorney he could hear of in Dover, that watch and search might be made on the spot for any further information; and now the only thing possible to be done was to secure some still more skilful agent in London to superintend the case, and set all the machinery of detection in motion to discover Mrs Hilyard. Vincent had nothing in the world but the income which he drew from the liberality of Salem; an income which could ill stand the drain of these oft-repeated journeys, not to speak of the expenses of Susan's defence. All that the minister had would not be enough to retain a fit defender for her, if she had to undergo the frightful ordeal of a trial. The very thought of it drove her unhappy brother desperate. Would it not be better if she died and escaped that crowning misery, which must kill her anyhow, if she survived to bear it? But these ponderings were as unprofitable as they were painful. When he had seen his mother, who whispered to him accounts of Susan's illness, which his mind was too much preoccupied to understand, he went away immediately to the railway, and hastened to town. While he stood waiting in the

lawyer's office, he took up listlessly, without knowing what he was doing, the newspaper of the day. There he found the whole terrible tale made into a romance of real life, in which his sister's name, indeed, was withheld, but no other particular spared. As he stood wiping the heavy dew from his forehead, half frantic with rage and despair, the quick eye of his misery caught a couple of clerks in another corner of the office, talking over another newspaper, full of lively interest and excitement. It was Susan's story that interested them; the compiler had heightened with romantic details those hideous bare facts which had changed all his life, and made the entire world a chaos to Vincent; and all over the country by this time, newspaper readers were waking up into excitement about this new tale of love, revenge, and crime. The poor minister put down the paper as if it had stung him, and drew back, tingling in every nerve, from the table, where he could almost hear the discussion which was going on about Miss ——; where she could have escaped to, and whether she would be found. It restored him to his senses and self-command when he found himself face to face with the cool lawyer, who waited for his tragic story as a matter of business, and who had nothing to do with the heartbreaks or the disgrace which it involved. He was detained there for some time, giving as full an account as he could of

all the circumstances, and describing as well as he could his reasons for suspecting Mrs Hilyard, and her mysterious appearance at the scene of the murder. Vincent perceived, with a sensation of comfort at his heart, that his story interested the acute attorney, accustomed to the tricks and expedients of crime, who perceived at once the circumstances of suspicion, and understood at once how to go about it, and ferret the secret out. The minister himself grew steadier as he entered into his narrative. No shivers of wonder or pain convulsed the calm lawyer as he listened. Under his touch, Susan's dreadful position became one not unprecedented, to be dealt with like any other condition of actual life; and when Vincent, after furnishing all the information he could, and satisfying himself that no time was to be lost in the prosecution of the search for the real criminal, left the office to return to Carlingford, it was with a mind somewhat calmed out of its first horror. He went back again by the train, deeply depressed and anxious, but not so susceptible to every glance and word as he had been an hour or two before. He tried, indeed, to take a certain gloomy satisfaction from the idea that now everything was known. Fear of discovery could no longer appal the stricken household; and to meet the horror in the face was less dreadful than to feel themselves skulking under a secret shadow which might at

any moment be found out. He set his face sternly, and looked everybody full in the eyes who looked at him, as he once more alighted at the familiar station. He accepted the fact that people were talking of him, pitying him, contemplating him with wonder and fright, as somehow involved in an atmosphere of tragedy and crime. With this feeling he went slowly along George Street on his homeward way, with no susceptibility left in him, so far as he was aware, except as concerned this sudden calamity which had swallowed up his life.

When suddenly the sound of a carriage stopping came dully upon his ears; he would not have noted or heard it but for the sound that followed of some one calling his own name, and the soft rush of footsteps on the pavement; even then he did not turn round to see who called him. It was accordingly with a thrill of strange emotion—a strange, sudden, guilty suffusion of delight over all his tingling frame and aching heart, even in the midst of his suffering, that he felt the light touch of Lady Western's hand first laid on his arm, then softly stealing within it in the sudden sympathy which possessed her as she looked up into his colourless face. It was pity and natural kindness which prompted the young Dowager to this unwonted familiar touch. She was sorry for him to the bottom of her heart—she would fain have made him amends somehow for the

terrible evil which had come upon him. With the natural impulse of a woman to caress or soothe, or cheat a man anyhow out of that look of suffering which it is intolerable to her to see on his face, Lady Western acted instinctively, without thinking what she did. She slid her beautiful hand into his arm, clung to him, looked up with her lovely appealing face and eyes full of tears to the pale face of the minister, which that touch moved beyond all expression. If he did not stop and take her into his arms, and lean his great anguish upon her in a sweetness of relief unspeakable and measureless, it was only because ordinary rule and custom are stronger than even passion. He was as much deceived as if he had done it, the poor young deluded soul. Out of the thunder and storm, all at once, without prelude or warning, he thought it was the light of love that broke upon him all radiant and glorious. With that he could brave all, overcome all; for that he could be content to fathom any depths of wretchedness. So he thought, as he looked down from those sudden heights of unhoped-for tremulous blessedness into that lovely face, and saw it trembling with divine compassion and tenderness. So he thought the ice breaking, the depths stirring in his own soul. Hope, deliverance, happiness, a delight more exquisite still, that consolation of love which makes anguish itself sweet, breathed over the poor young Noncon-

formist as that hand slid within his arm. His very brain grew dizzy with the sweetness of relief, the sudden ease that possessed his soul.

"Oh, Mr Vincent, my heart is breaking; what shall we do—what shall we do?" cried Lady Western. "If it is true, I shall never dare speak to you again, and I feel for you to the bottom of my heart. Oh, Mr Vincent, you don't think she did it? I am sure she did not do it—*your* sister! It was bad enough before," cried the lovely creature, crying without restraint, but still holding his arm and gazing up into his face, "but now my heart is broken. Oh, will you tell me what I must do? I will not go to *him*, for he has been a bad man; and I dare not go to your dear mother as I should like to go; and I feel for you, oh, to the very bottom of my heart!"

"Then I can bear it," said Vincent. Though he did not speak another word, the sound of his voice, the expression of his face, betrayed him. He put his hand involuntarily upon the little hand that rested on his arm. It was all so sudden that his self-command forsook him. A smile trembled upon his face as he looked down at her with all his heart in his eyes. "Then I can bear it," said the poor young minister, overwhelmed and penetrated by that exquisite consolation. Lady Western gave a little start of alarm as she read the unmistakable meaning in his face. She withdrew her hand hastily with a flush of radiant

colour and downcast look of fright and shame. What had she done? Her confusion, her agitation, her sudden withdrawal, did but increase the spell. To Vincent's charmed soul it seemed that *she* had betrayed herself, and that womanly reserve alone drew her back. He attended her to her carriage with a tender devotion which could not express itself in words. When he had put her in, he lingered, gazing at the face, now so troubled and downcast, with a delicious feeling that he had a right to gaze at her. "You have made me strong to bear all things," he said, in the low tone of passion and secret joy. In the depth of his delusion he saw no other meaning than sudden timidity and womanly reticence in her confused and alarmed looks. When the carriage drove off he stood looking after it with eyes full of dreamy light. Darkness surrounded him on every side, darkness more hideous than a nightmare. The poor young soul believed for that delicious moment that superlative and ineffable, like his misery, was to be his joy.

Harder thoughts regained the mastery when he got within his own house again. It was no longer the orderly, calm, well-regulated house which had taken in the minister of Salem by way of adding yet a finer touch to its own profound respectability. Susan's unhappy presence pervaded the place. Boxes of other lodgers going away encumbered the hall, where the

landlady hovered weeping, and admitted the pastor sullenly with an audible sob.

Though he had imagined himself invested in armour of light against all these petty assaults, Vincent was not strong enough, even in the fictitious strength given him by Lady Western's kindness, to bear the reality of his position. The very face of his landlady brought before him the whole array of faces at Salem, which he must shortly encounter, all directed towards him in judicial severity,—an awful tribunal. When he reached the shelter of his room up-stairs, the 'Carlingford Gazette' lay upon his table, folded out so as to show that mysterious story of Miss ———, which some one in the house had certainly identified. The poor minister took it in his hands with an impulse to tear it in pieces—to trample it under foot—to give some outlet, now he was by himself, to the rage and indignation with which he saw his own calamity turned into a romance for the amusement of the public. He checked himself with a bitter smile at his own folly; unconsciously he bethought himself of Tozer's back-parlour, of Mr Tufton's sitting-room, of all the places about where he had seen his people gleaning information and amusement from the 'Carlingford Gazette.' How the little paper, generally so harmless, would amuse and excite its readers to-day! What surmises there would be, and how soon the fatal knowledge would

ooze out and be talked over on all sides! It was no matter of feeling to him—it was ruin in every way to the poor young minister, whose credit and living depended solely upon the caprice of his "flock." The sight of the newspaper had so stunned him, that it was some time before he perceived a letter lying under it on the table. When he saw that the post-mark was Dover, he snatched up this letter eagerly and tore it open. It was from the lawyer whom he had consulted there. For the first moment he did not comprehend the information it conveyed. Good news!—what news could be good under his dreadful circumstances? The young man's mind was stupified, and could not take it in. It was the copy of a doctor's certificate—the opinion of a famous surgeon who had been summoned from London—to the effect that Colonel Mildmay's wound was not necessarily fatal, and that if fever did not come on he might recover. The minister read it over again and again before he could comprehend it; and when he did comprehend it, the fact seemed rather an aggravation than a comfort to his misery. He was not dead—this destroyer. Perhaps at this moment, when his unhappy victim lay struggling between life and death, he, with the horrible good fortune of wickedness, was coming back from the edge of the grave. At the first shock it did not seem good news to Vincent. Not dead!—"the cursed

villain," he said through his clenched teeth. The earth was not rid of that pitiless wretch. It looked like another grand injustice in the world, where all the landmarks were overturned, and only evil seemed to prosper. He did not connect it anyhow with possible relief or deliverance to Susan; on the contrary, it raised in his own mind all the resentment and rage which had been quenched by Mildmay's supposed death. He could scarcely compose himself after that unexpected information. If all went well, it would naturally change the character of the case—perhaps, under the circumstances, there might be no prosecution, said the lawyer's letter. Vincent was young—excited out of all self-command or prudential considerations. In his soul he resented even this hope, which might still save his sister, and grudged what he felt to be the diabolical good-luck of her destroyer. Not dead!—not going to die!—not punished anyhow. About, after all the misery he had occasioned, to recover, and go on prosperously again, and spread wretchedness and ruin upon others. "He shall render me an account," cried the minister fiercely to himself. "He shall answer for it to me!" He felt it intolerable, that this guilty soul should escape its punishment.

Thoughts more reasonable, however, came to him after a time. He began to see the importance of the

intelligence to Susan—and even to himself. At least she could not be accused of shedding blood—at least she might be hidden somewhere in her shame, poor lost soul, and kept from the cruel eyes of the world. When he began to feel the influence of this gleam of comfort, he ventured to go to the sick-room to tell his mother, whom he had not yet seen; but Mrs Vincent was deaf and insensible to everything but her child, whose need and danger were too urgent to permit more distant spectres, however terrible, to be visible in her sick-chamber. Mary, already worn out with fatigue, had gone to bed with a headache, with the liveliest conviction in her mind that she had taken the fever too. The widow, who had lived for the past week as though she had no physical frame at all, sat sleepless, with hot eyes and pallid face, by her daughter's bed. She could still smile—smiles more heart-breaking than any outcry of anguish—and leaned her poor head upon her son, as he came near to her, with a tender pressure of her arms and strain of absolute dependence which went to his heart. She could not speak, or say, as she had said so often, that her boy must take care of his sister—that Susan had no one else to stand by her. Leaning upon him in an unspeakable appeal of love and weakness, smiling on him with her wistful quivering lips, was all the poor mother could do now.

All; for in that room no one could speak. One voice filled its silence. The restless movement of the head on that pillow turning from side to side in search of the rest which was nowhere to be found, stilled every other motion. Not even fever could flush the marble whiteness of her face. Awfully alone, in her mother's anxious presence, with her brother by her bedside, Susan went on unconscious through the wild distracted world of her own thoughts—through what had been her own thoughts before horror and anguish cast them all astray. Vincent stood aside in breathless attention like the rest, before he had been many minutes in the room. We say to each other how strange it is that no heart can ever fully communicate itself to another; but when that revelation does take place, awful is the spectacle. All unawares, in her dread distraction, Susan opened up her heart.

"What does it matter what they will say?" said Susan; "I will never see them again. Unless—yes, put down her veil; she is pretty, very pretty; but what has Herbert to do with her? He said it was me he wanted; and why did he bring me away if he did not love me? Love me! and deceived me, and told me lies. Oh God, oh God! is it not Carlingford? Where is it? I am taking God's name in vain. I was not thinking of Him; I was thinking——. His name is Fordham, Herbert Fordham,—do you hear? What do

you mean by Mildmay? I know no Mildmay. Stop and let me think. Herbert—Herbert! Oh, where are you—where are you? Do you think it never could be him, but only a lie? Well! if he did not love me, I could bear it; but why, why did he cheat me, and bring me away? The door is locked; they will not let me get out. Herbert! was there never, never any Herbert in the world? Oh, come back, even if you are only a dream! Locked! If they would only kill me! What do they mean to do with me? Oh God, oh God! but I must marry him if he says so. I must, *must* marry him, though he has told me lies. I must, whatever he does. Even if I could get through the window and escape; for they will call me wicked. Oh, mamma, mamma! and Arthur a minister, and to bring disgrace on *him!* But I am not disgraced. Oh no, no; never, never!—I will die first—I will kill him first. Open the door; oh, open the door! Let me go!"

She struggled up in one of her wilder paroxysms. She had thrown herself half out of bed, rising up wildly, and tossing her arms into the air, before her startled brother could rush forward to control her. But as the voice of the unhappy girl rose into frenzy, some unseen attendants stole in and took her out of his unskilful hands. The sight was too painful for unaccustomed eyes—for eyes of love, which could scarcely bear, even for her own sake, to see such means of re-

straint employed upon Susan. Mrs Vincent stood by, uttering unconscious cries, imploring the two strong women who held her daughter, oh, not to hurt her, not to grasp her so tightly; while Susan herself beat the air in vain, and entreated, with passionate outcries, to be set free—to be let go. When she was again subdued, and sank into the quiet of exhaustion, Vincent withdrew from this saddest scene of all, utterly depressed and broken-spirited. The wretch lived who had wrought this dread wreck and ruin. What did it matter? Within that room it gave no relief, eased no heart, to say that he was not dead. Forms more terrific still than those of law and public vengeance—madness and death—stood on either side of Susan's bed; till they had fought out the desperate quarrel, what matter to those most immediately concerned whether a greater or a lesser penalty lowered over her head? The minister went back to his own retirement with an aching heart, utterly dejected and depressed. He threw himself into a chair to think it all over, as he said to himself; but as he sat there, hopeless and solitary, his mind strayed from Susan. Could any one blame him? Who does not know what it is to have one secret spot of personal consolation to fly to in the midst of trouble? Vincent betook himself there in the utter darkness of everything around. Once more he seemed to feel that sudden touch which took away half his burden. No words

could have spoken to his heart like that fairy hand upon his arm. He brooded over it, not thinking, only living over again the moment which had made so great a difference in the world. He forgot Fordham; he forgot everything; he took neither reason nor likelihood with him in his self-delusion. A sudden rosy mist suffused once more the cruel earth upon which he was standing; whatever came, he had something of his own to fall back upon, an ineffable secret sweetness, which stanched every wound before it was made. The young minister, out of the very depths of calamity, escaped into this garden of delights; he put aside the intolerable misery of the house; he thrust away from him all the lesser troubles which bristled thick in front of him in the very name of Salem. He fled to that one spot of joy which he thought remained to him in the middle of the waste, doubly sweet and precious. It gave him strength to hold out through his trouble, without being overwhelmed. He escaped to that delicious resting-place almost against his will, not able to resist the charm of the indescribable solace he found there. He alone, of all concerned, had that footbreadth of personal happiness to take refuge in amid the bitter storm. He did not know it was all delusion, self-deception, a woeful miserable blunder. He hugged it to his heart in secret, and took a comfort not to be spoken from the thought. Vanity of vanities; but nothing else in

the world could have stolen with such fairy balms of consolation and strength to the heart of the poor minister. It was not long till he was called to face his fate again, and all the heavy front of battle set in array against him; but it was with a feeling of sweet guilt that he started up in the winter twilight, and left his room to see Tozer, who waited for him below. That room henceforward was inhabited by the fairy vision. When he went back to it, Love, the consolatrix, met him again, stealing that visionary hand within his arm. Blank darkness dwelt all around; here, falsest, fairest mirage of imagination, palpitated one delicious gleam of light.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SOMEHOW the heavy week stole round without any other fluctuations but those terrible ones of Susan's fever. Dreadful consolation and terrible doubt breathed forth in those heartrending revelations which her poor unconscious soul was continually pouring forth. The unhappy girl showed her heart all naked and undisguised to the watchers round her — a heart bewildered, alarmed, desperate, but not overwhelmed with guilty passion. Through the dreadful haze which enveloped her mind, flashes of indignation, bursts of hope, shone tragical and fierce; but she was not a disgraced creature who lay there, arguing pitifully with herself what she must do; not disgraced—but in an agony of self-preservation could she have snatched up the ready pistol—could it be true? When Vincent went into that room, it was always to withdraw with a shuddering dread. Had she escaped one horror to fall into another yet more horrible? That evidence of

which, with Mrs Hilyard's face before his eyes, he had been half contemptuous at first, returned upon him with ever-growing probability. Driven to bay, driven mad, reason and self-control scared by the horrible emergency, had the desperate creature resorted to the first wild expedient within her reach to save herself at last? With this hideous likelihood growing in his mind, Vincent had to face the Sunday, which came upon him like a new calamity. He would fain have withdrawn, and, regardless of anything else which might happen, have sent once more for Beecher. To confront the people of Salem, to look down upon those familiar rows of faces, all of them bearing a consciousness of the story in the newspapers, acquainted with all that his landlady could tell, and guessing but too distinctly the terrible misfortune which had befallen his family, seemed more than flesh and blood could bear. He was sitting alone, pondering all this, with a letter which he had commenced to write to Beecher before him, when Tozer, who was now his constant visitor, came in. There could be no doubt of the butterman's honest and genuine sympathy, but, unfortunately, there was just as little doubt that Tozer took a pleasure in managing the minister's affairs at this crisis, and piloting him through the troubled waters. Tozer did all but neglect his business to meet the emergency; he carried matters with rather a high hand in the meetings of the manag-

ing committee; he took absolute control, or wished to do so, of Vincent's proceedings. "We'll tide it over, we'll tide it over," he said, rubbing his hands. To go in, in this state of mind, secure in his own resources and in the skill with which he could guide the wavering and half-informed mind of Salem, fluctuating as it did between horror and sympathy, doubtful whether to take up the minister's cause with zeal, or to cast him off and disown him, and to find the minister himself giving in, deserting his post at the most critical moment, and making useless all that his patron was doing for him, was too much for the deacon's patience. He sat down in indignant surprise opposite Vincent, and struck his stick against the floor involuntarily, by way of emphasis to his words.

"Mr Vincent, sir, this ain't the thing to do—I tell you it ain't the thing to do. Salem has a right to expect different," cried Tozer, in the warmth of his disappointment; "a congregation as has never said a word, and office-bearers as have stuck by you and stood up for you whatever folks liked to say! I'm a man as will never desert my pastor in trouble; but I'd like to know what you call this, Mr Vincent, but a deserting of *me?* What's the good of fighting for the minister, if he gives in and sends for another man, and won't face nothing for himself? It's next Sunday as is all the battle. Get that over, and things will come straight.

When they see you in the pulpit in your old way, and all things as they was, bless you, they'll get used to it, and won't mind the papers no more nor—nor I do. I tell you, sir, it's next Sunday as is the battle. I don't undertake to answer for the consequences, not if you gives in, and has Mr Beecher down for next Sunday. It ain't the thing to do, Mr Vincent; Salem folks won't put up with that. Your good mother, poor thing, wouldn't say no different. If you mean to stay and keep things straight in Carlingford, you'll go into that pulpit, and look as if nothing had happened. It's next Sunday as is the battle."

"Look as if nothing had happened!—and why should I wish to stay in Carlingford, or—or anywhere?" cried Vincent, in a momentary outbreak of dejection. But he threw down his pen, and closed his blotting-book over the half-written letter. He was too wretched to have much resolution one way or another. To argue the matter was worse than to suffer any consequences, however hard they might be.

"I don't deny it's natural as you should feel strange," admitted Tozer. "I do myself, as am only your friend, Mr Vincent, when folks are a-talking in the shop, and going over one thing and another—asking if it's true as she belongs to you, and how a minister's daughter ever come to know the likes of him——"

"For heaven's sake, no more, no more!—you will

drive me mad!" cried Vincent, springing to his feet. Tozer, thus suddenly interrupted, stared a little, and then changed the subject, though without quite finding out how it was that he had startled his sensitive companion into such sudden impatience. "When I was only telling him the common talk!" as he said to his wife in the privacy of their own parlour. In the mean time he had other subjects equally interesting.

"If you'll take my advice, you'll begin your coorse all the same," said Tozer; "it would have a good effect, that would. When folks are in a state of excitement, and a-looking for something, to come down upon them as before, and accordin' to intimation, would have a wonderful effect, Mr Vincent. You take my word, sir, it would be very telling—would that. Don't lose no time, but begin your coorse as was intimated. It's a providence, is the intimation. I wouldn't say nothing about what's happened—not plain out; but if you could bring in a kind of an inference like, nothing as had anything to do with the story in the papers, but just as might be understood——"

The butterman sat quite calmly and at his ease, but really anxious and interested, making his sober suggestions. The unfortunate minister, unable otherwise to subdue his impatience and wretchedness, fell to walking up and down the room, as was natural. When he could bear it no longer, he came back to the table at

which Tozer sat in all the pomp of advice and management. He took his unfinished letter and tore it in little pieces, then stopped the calm flow of the deacon's counsel by a sudden outburst.

"I will preach," cried the young man, scattering the bits of paper out of his hand unawares. "Is not that enough? don't tell me what I am to do—the evil is sufficient without that. I tell you I will preach. I would rather cut off my right hand, if that would do as well. I am speaking like a child or a fool: who cares for my right hand, I wonder, or my life, or my senses? No more of this. I will preach—don't speak of it again. It will not matter a hundred years hence," muttered the minister, with that sudden adoption of the philosophy of recklessness which misery sometimes plays with. He threw himself into his chair again, and covered his face with his hands. He was thinking of Salem, and all those rows of gazing eyes. He could see them all in their pews; imagination, with a cruel freak like a mocking spirit, depicting all the finery of Mrs Pigeon and Mrs Brown upon that vivid canvass. The minister groaned at the thought of them; but to put it down on paper, and record the pang of exasperation and intolerable wretchedness which was thus connected with the fine winter bonnets of the poulterer's wife and the dairy-woman would make a picture rather grotesque than terrible to unconcerned eyes. It was

dreadful earnest to poor Vincent, thinking how he should stand before them on that inexorable Sunday, and preach "as if nothing had happened;" reading all the while, in case his own mind would let him forget them, the vulgarest horrors of all that had happened in all that crowd of eyes.

"And you'll find a great consolation, take my word, sir, in the thought that you're a-doing of your duty," said Tozer, shaking his head solemnly, as he rose to go away; "that's a wonderful consolation, Mr Vincent, to all of us; and especially to a minister that knows he's a-serving his Master and saving souls."

Saving souls! Heaven help him! the words rang in his ears like mocking echoes long after the butterman had settled into his arm-chair, and confided to his wife and Phœbe that the pastor was a-coming to himself and taking to his duties, and that we'll tide it over yet. "Saving souls!" the words came back and back to Vincent's bewildered mind. They formed a measure and cadence in their constant repetition, haunting him like some spiritual suggestion, as he looked over, with senses confused and dizzy, his little stock of sermons, to make preparation for the duty which he could not escape. At last he tossed them all away in a heap, seized his pen, and poured forth his heart. Saving souls! what did it mean? He was not writing a sermon. Out of the depths of his troubled heart poured

all the chaos of thought and wonder, which leapt into fiery life under that quickening touch of personal misery and unrest. He forgot the bounds of orthodox speculation—all bounds save those of the drear mortal curtain of death, on the other side of which that great question is solved. He set forth the dark secrets of life with exaggerated touches of his own passion and anguish. He painted out of his own aching fancy a soul innocent, yet stained with the heaviest of mortal crimes: he turned his wild light aside and poured it upon another, foul to the core, yet unassailable by man. Saving souls!—which was the criminal? which was the innocent? A wild confusion of sin and sorrow, of dreadful human complications, misconceptions, of all incomprehensible, intolerable thoughts, surged round and round him as he wrote. Were the words folly that haunted him with such echoes? Could he, and such as he, unwitting of half the mysteries of life, do anything to that prodigious work? Could words help it—vain syllables of exhortation or appeal? God knows. The end of it all was a confused recognition of the One half-known, half-identified, who, if any hope were to be had, held that hope in His hands. The preacher, who had but dim acquaintance with His name, paused, in the half idiocy of his awakened genius, to wonder like a child, if perhaps his simple mother knew a little more of that far-off wondrous figure—recognised it

wildly by the confused lights as the only hope in earth or heaven—and so rose up, trembling with excitement and exhaustion, to find that he had spent the entire night in this sudden inspiration, and that the wintry dawn, cold and piercing to the heart, was stealing over the opposite roofs, and another day had begun.

This was the sermon which startled half the population of Carlingford on that wonderful Sunday. Salem had never been so full before. Every individual of the Chapel folks was there who could by any means come out, and many other curious inhabitants, full of natural wonder, to see how a man looked, and what he would preach about, concerning whom, and whose family, such mysterious rumours were afloat. The wondering congregation thrilled like one soul under that touch of passion. Faces grew pale, long sobs of emotion burst here and there from the half-terrified excited audience, who seemed to see around them, instead of the every-day familiar world, a throng of those souls whom the preacher disrobed of everything but passion and consciousness and immortality. Just before the conclusion, when he came to a sudden pause all at once, and made a movement forward as if to lay hold of something he saw, the effect was almost greater than the deacons could approve of in chapel. One woman screamed aloud, another fainted, some people started to their feet—all waited with suspended breath for the next

words, electrified by the real *life* which palpitated there before them, where life so seldom appears, in the decorous pulpit. When he went on again the people were almost too much excited to perceive the plain meaning of his words, if any plain meaning had ever been in that passionate outcry of a wounded and bewildered soul. When the services were over, many of them watched the precipitate rush which the young preacher made through the crowd into his vestry. He could not wait the dispersion of the flock, as was the usual custom. It was with a buzz of excitement that the congregation did disperse slowly, in groups, asking each other had such a sermon ever been preached before in Carlingford. Some shook their heads, audibly expressing their alarm lest Mr Vincent should go too far, and unsettle his mind; some pitied and commented on his looks—women these. He sent them all away in a flutter of excitement, which obliterated all other objects of talk for the moment, even the story in the papers, and left himself in a gloomy splendour of eloquence and uncertainty, the only object of possible comment until the fumes of his wild oration should have died away.

"I said we'd tide it over," said Tozer, in a triumphant whisper, to his wife. "That's what he can do when he's well kep' up to it, and put on his mettle. The man as says he ever heard anything as was finer,

or had more mind in it," added the worthy butterman to his fellow-deacons, "has had more opportunities nor me; and though I say it, I've heard the best preachers in our connection. That's philosophical, that is—there ain't a man in the Church as I ever heard of as could match that, and not a many as comes out o' 'Omerton. We're not a-going to quarrel with a pastor as can preach a sermon like that, not because he's had a misfortune in his family. Come into the vestry, Pigeon, and say a kind word—as you're sorry, and we'll stand by him. He wants to be kep' up, that's what he wants. Mind like that always does. It ain't equal to doing for itself, like most. Come along with me, and say what's kind, and cheer him up, as has exerted hisself and done his best."

"It *was* rousing up," said Pigeon, with a little reluctance; "even the missis didn't go again' that; but where he's weak is in the application. I don't mind just shaking hands——"

"If we was all to go, he might take it kind," suggested Brown, the dairyman, who had little to say, and not much confidence in his own opinion; and pride and kindness combined won the day. The deacons who were in attendance went in, in a body, to shake hands with the pastor, and express their sympathy, and congratulate him on his sermon, the latter particular being an established point of deacon's duty

in every well-regulated and harmonious community. They went in rather pleased with themselves, and full of the gratification they were about to confer. But the open door of the vestry revealed an empty room, with the preacher's black gown lying tossed upon the floor, as if it had been thrown down recklessly in his sudden exit. The little procession came to a halt, and stared in each other's faces. Their futile good intentions flashed into exasperation. They had come to bestow their favour upon him, to make him happy, and behold he had fled in contemptuous haste, without waiting for their approval; even Tozer felt the shock of the failure. So far as the oligarchs of Salem were concerned, the sermon might never have been preached, and the pastor sank deeper than ever into the bad opinion of Mr Pigeon and Mr Brown.

In the mean time Vincent had rushed from his pulpit, thrown on his coat, and rushed out again into the cold mid-day, tingling in every limb with the desperate effort of self-restraint, which alone had enabled him to preserve the gravity of the pulpit and conclude the services with due steadiness and propriety. When he made that sudden pause, it was not for nought. Effective though it was, it was no trick of oratory which caught the breath at his lips, and transfixed him for the moment. There, among the crowded pews of Salem, deep in the further end of the chapel,

half lost in the throng of listeners, suddenly, all at once, had flashed upon him a face—a face, unchanged from its old expression, intent as if no deluge had descended, no earthquake fallen; listening, as of old, with gleaming keen eyes and close-shut emphatic mouth. The whole building reeled in Vincent's eyes, as he caught sight of that thin head, dark and silent, gleaming out in all its expressive refinement and intelligence from the common faces round. How he kept still and went on was to himself a kind of miracle. Had she moved or left the place, he could not have restrained himself. But she did not move. He watched her, even while he prayed, with a profanity of which he was conscious to the heart. He watched her with her frightful composure finding the hymn, standing up with the rest to sing. When she disappeared, he rushed from the pulpit—rushed out—pursued her. She was not to be seen anywhere when he got outside, and the first stream of the throng of dispersing worshippers, which fortunately, however, included none of the leading people of Salem, beheld with amazed eyes the minister who darted through them, and took his hurried way to Back Grove Street. Could she have gone there? He debated the question vainly with himself as he hastened on the familiar road. The door was open as of old, the children playing upon the crowded pavement. He flew up the

staircase, which creaked under his hasty foot, and knocked again at the well-known door, instinctively pausing before it, though he had meant to burst in and satisfy himself. Such a violence was unnecessary—as if the world had stood still, Mrs Hilyard opened the door and stood before him, with her little kerchief on her head, her fingers still marked with blue. "Mr Vincent," said this incomprehensible woman, admitting him without a moment's hesitation, pointing him to a chair as of old, and regarding him with the old steady look of half-amused observation, "you have never come to see me on a Sunday before. It is the best day for conversation for people who have work to do. Sit down, take breath; I have leisure, and there is time now for everything we can have to say."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

VINCENT put out his hand to seize upon the strange woman who confronted him with a calmness much more confounding than any agitation. But her quick eye divined his purpose. She made the slightest movement aside, extended her own, and had shaken hands with him in his utter surprise before he knew what he was doing. The touch bewildered his faculties, but did not move him from the impulse, which was too real to yield to anything. He took the door from her hand, closed it, placed himself against it. "You are my prisoner," said Vincent. He could not say any more, but gazed at her with blank eyes of determination. He was no longer accessible to reason, pity, any sentiment but one. He had secured her. He forgot even to be amazed at her composure. She was his prisoner—that one fact was all he cared to know.

"I have been your prisoner the entire morning," said Mrs Hilyard, with an attempt at her old manner, which scarcely could have deceived the minister had

he preserved his wits sufficiently to notice it, but at the same time betraying a little surprise, recognising instinctively that here she had come face to face with those blind forces of nature upon which no arguments can tell. "You were in much less doubt about your power of saving souls the last time I heard you, Mr Vincent. Sit down, please. It is not long since we met, but many things have happened. It is kind of you to give me so early an opportunity of talking them over. I am sorry to see you look excited—but after such exertions, it is natural, I suppose——"

"You are my prisoner," repeated Vincent, without taking any notice of what she said. He was no match for her in any passage of arms. Her words fell upon his ears without any meaning. Only a dull determination possessed him. He locked the door, while she, somewhat startled in her turn, stood looking on; then he went to the window, threw it open, and called to some one below—any one—he did not care who. "Fetch a policeman—quick—lose no time!" cried Vincent. Then he closed the window, turned round, and confronted her again. At last a little agitation was visible in this invulnerable woman. For an instant her head moved with a spasmodic thrill, and her countenance changed. She gave a rapid glance round as if to see whether any outlet was left. Vincent's eye followed hers.

"You cannot escape—you shall not escape," he said, slowly; "don't think it—nothing you can do or say will help you now."

"Ah!" said Mrs Hilyard, with a startled, panting breath. "You have come to the inexorable," she said, after a moment; "most men do, one time or another. You decline meeting us on our ground, and take to your own. Very well," she continued, seating herself by the table where she had already laid down one of the Salem hymn-books; "till this arrival happens, we may have a little conversation, Mr Vincent. I was about to tell you something which ought to be good news. Though you don't appreciate my regard for you, I will tell it you all the same. What noise is that? Oh, the boys, I suppose, rushing off for your policeman. I hope you know what you are going to say to that functionary when he comes. In the mean time, wait a little—you must hear my news."

The only answer Vincent made was to look out again from the window, under which a little group of gazers had already collected. His companion heard the sounds below with a thrill of alarm more real than she had ever felt before. She sat rigidly, with her hand upon the hymn-book, preserving her composure by a wonderful effort, intensely alive and awake to everything, and calculating her chances with a certain desperation. This one thing alone of all that had

happened, the Back Grove Street needlewoman, confident in her own powers and influence, had not foreseen.

"Listen!" she cried, with an excitement and haste which she could not quite conceal. "That man is not dead, you know. Come here—shut the window! Young man, do you hear what I say to you? Am I likely to indulge in vain talk now? Come here—here! and understand what I have to say."

"It does not matter," said Vincent, closing the window. "What you say can make no difference. There is but one thing possible now."

"Yes, you are a man!" cried the desperate woman, clasping her hands tight, and struggling with herself to keep down all appearance of her anxiety. "You are deaf, blind! You have turned your back upon reason. That is what it always comes to. Hush! come here—closer; they make so much noise in the street. I believe," she said, with a dreadful smile, "you are afraid of me. You think I will stab you, or something. Don't entertain such vulgar imaginations, Mr Vincent. I have told you before, you have fine manners, though you are only a Dissenting minister. I have something to tell you—something you will be glad to know——"

Here she made another pause for breath—merely for breath—not for any answer, for there was no answer in her companion's face. He was listening

for the footsteps in the street—the steps of his returning messengers. And so was she, as she drew in that long breath, expanding her forlorn bosom with air, which the quick throbs of her heart so soon exhausted. She looked in his eyes with an eager fire in her own, steadily, without once shifting her gaze. The two had changed places. It was he, in his inexorableness, close shut up against any appeal or argument, that was the superior now.

"When you hear what I have to say, you will not be so calm," she went on, with another involuntary heave of her breast. "Listen! your sister is safe. Yes, you may start, but what I say is true. Don't go to the window yet. Stop, hear me! I tell you your sister is safe. Yes, it may be the people you have sent for. Never mind, this is more important. You have locked the door, and nobody can come in. I tell you again and again, your sister is safe. That man is not dead—you know he is not dead. And yesterday — hush! never mind! — yesterday," she said, rising up as Vincent moved, and detaining him with her hand upon his arm, which she clutched with desperate fingers, "he made a declaration that it was not she; a declaration before the magistrates," continued Mrs Hilyard, gasping as her strength failed her, and following him, holding his arm as he moved to the window, "that it was not she

—not she! do you understand me—not she! He swore to it. He said it was another, and not that girl. Do you hear me?" she cried, raising her voice, and shaking his arm wildly in the despair of the moment, but repeating her words with the clearness of desperation—"He said on his oath it was not she."

She had followed him to the window, not pleading for herself by a single word, but with her desperate hand upon his arm, her face pinched and pale to the lips, and a horrible anxiety gleaming in the eyes which she never removed from his face. The two stood together there for a moment in that silent encounter; he looking down at the group of people below, she watching his face with her eyes, clutching his arm with her hand, appealing to him with a speechless suspense and terror, which no words can describe. Her fate hung upon the merest thread, and she knew it. She had no more power to move him in her own person than any one of the ragged children who stood gazing up at the window. There he stood, silent, blank, immovable; and she, suffering no expression of her dreadful suspense to escape her, stood clutching his arm, seeing, as she had never seen before, a pale vision of prisons, scaffolds, judgments, obscuring earth and heaven. She was brave, and had dared them all wittingly in the crisis of her fate, but the reality caught the labouring breath from her lips, and

turned her heart sick. This morning she had woke with a great burden taken off her mind, and, daring as she was, had faced the only man who had any clue to her secret, confident in his generous nature and her own power over him. But this confidence had failed her utterly, and in the very ease and relief of her mind —a relief more blessed and grateful than she could have acknowledged to any mortal—lo! here arose before her close and real the spectre which she had defied. It approached step by step, while she gazed with wild eyes and panting breath upon the inexorable man who had it in his power to deliver her over to law and justice. She dared not say a word of entreaty to him; she could only watch his eyes, those eyes which never lighted upon her, with speechless dread and anxiety. Many evils she had borne in her life—many she had confronted and overcome—obstinate will and unscrupulous resolution had carried her one way or other through all former dangers. Here for the first time she stood helpless, watching with an indescribable agony the face of the young man at whom she had so often smiled. Some sudden unforeseen touch might still set her free. Her breath came quick in short gasps—her breast heaved—her fate was absolutely beyond her own control, in Vincent's hands.

Just then there came into the narrow street a sound of carriage-wheels. Instinctively Vincent started. The

blank of his determination was broken by this distant noise. Somehow it came naturally into the silence of this room and woke up the echoes of the past in his mind; the past—that past in which Lady Western's carriage was the celestial chariot, and she the divinest lady of life. Like a gleam of light there suddenly dawned around him a remembrance of the times he had seen her here—the times he had seen her anywhere; the last time—the sweet hand she had laid upon his arm. Vincent's heart awoke under that touch. With a start he looked down upon the hand which was at this moment on his arm,—not the hand of love,—fingers with the blood pressed down to the very tips, holding with desperation that arm which had the power of life and death. A hurried exclamation came from his lips; he looked at the woman by him, and read vaguely in her face all the passion and agony there. Vaguely it occurred to him that to save or to sacrifice her was in his hands, and that he had but a moment now to decide. The carriage-wheels came nearer, nearer, ringing delicious promises in his ears—nearer too came the servants of that justice he had invoked; and what plea was it, what strange propitiation, which his companion had put forth to him to stay his avenging hand? Only a moment now; he shook her hand off his arm, and in his turn took hold of hers; he held her fast while she faced him in an

agony of restrained suspense and terror. How her worn bosom panted with that quick coming breath! Her life was in his hands.

"What was that you said?" asked Vincent, with the haste and brevity of passion, suddenly perceiving how much had to be done in this moment of fate.

The long-restrained words burst from his companion's lips almost before he had done speaking. "I said your sister was safe!" she cried; "I said he had declared her innocent on his oath. It was not she—he has sworn it, all a man could do. To sacrifice another," she went on breathlessly with a strong momentary shudder, pausing to listen, "will do nothing for her—nothing! You hear what I say. It was not she; he has sworn upon his solemn oath. Do as you will. She is safe—safe!—as safe as—as—God help me—as safe as my child;—and it was for her sake——"

She stopped—words would serve her no further—and just then there came a summons to the locked door. Vincent dropped her arm, and she recoiled from him with an involuntary movement; unawares she clasped her thin hands and gave one wild look into his face. Not even now could she tell what he was going to do, this dreadful arbiter of fate. The key, as he turned it in the door, rang in her ears like thunder; and his hand trembled as he set open the entrance of the needlewoman's mean apartment. On the thresh-

old stood no vulgar messenger of fate, but a bright vision, sad, yet sweeter than anything else in earth or almost in heaven to Vincent. He fell back without saying anything before the startled look of that beautiful face. He let in, not law and justice, but love and pity, to this miserable room.

"Oh, Rachel! where have you been? have you seen him? have you heard of him? where have you been?" cried the visitor, going up to the pallid woman, whose eyes were still fixed on Vincent. Mrs Hilyard could not speak. She dropped upon her knees by the table, shivering and crouching like a stricken creature. She leaned her head upon the hymn-book which lay there so strangely at variance with everything else around it. Pale with fright and horror, Lady Western appealed to Vincent. "She is ill, she is fainting—oh, Mr Vincent, what have you been saying to her? She was not to blame," cried the new-comer, in her ignorance. Vincent attempted no reply, offered no help. In his heart he could have snatched away those beautiful hands which embraced and comforted his "prisoner," thus rescued out of his grasp. It was hard to see her touch that guilty conscious woman whom his own heart refused to pity. He stood by looking on, watching her still; the instinct of vengeance had been awakened within him. He was reluctant to let her go.

"You have been saying something to her," said Lady Western, with tears in her eyes; "and how could *she* be to blame? Rachel! Oh, I wonder, I wonder if she loved him after all?" cried the beautiful creature, in the bewilderment of her innocence and ignorance. She stood bending over the kneeling figure, troubled, perplexed almost more than her strange sister-in-law had ever yet perplexed her. She could not account for this extraordinary access of agitation. It was nohow explainable, except upon that supposition which opened at once the warmest sympathies of the gentle young woman's heart.

"Rachel, dear!" she cried, kissing softly the thin hands worn with toil that covered Mrs Hilyard's face —"he is still living, there is hope; perhaps he will get better; and he is showing a better mind too," she added, after a little tremulous pause. "I came to see if you had come home to tell you; he has sworn that it was not—oh, Mr Vincent, I sent you word immediately when I got the message—he says it was not your sister; she had nothing to do with it, he says. Now I can look you in the face again. The first thing he was able to do when he came to himself was to clear her; and now she will get better—and your dear mother?"—said Lady Western, looking wistfully into the young man's face. In that moment, while her attention was directed otherwise, Mrs Hilyard rose up

and took her seat again; took her seat because she was not able to stand, and scarcely able, by all the power of her will, to compose the nerves which, for the first time in her life, had utterly got the better of her. She wiped off the heavy moisture from her face with a furtive hand before the young Dowager turned her eyes again that way. She grasped fast hold of the only thing on the table, the Salem hymn-book, and with a vast effort regained some degree of self-command. For that precious moment she was free from observation, for nothing in the world could have prevented Vincent from returning with his own fascinated eyes the look which Lady Western turned upon him. While the two looked at each other, she was safe; she collected her scattered forces in that invaluable instant. She was herself again when Lady Western looked round, somewhat nervous and embarrassed, from the gaze of passion with which her look of deprecation and sympathy had been met. If a slight shiver now and then thrilled over Mrs Hilyard's figure, it was as like to be cold as emotion. Otherwise, she sat with her arm resting on the table and her hand clenched upon the hymn-book, her thin lips clinging spasmodically to each other, and her face pallid, but to an uncritical observer scarcely changed from the grey and vigilant composure of her usual appearance. So many storms had passed over that countenance, that the momentary

agony of horror and fright from which she had scarcely yet emerged did not tell as it would have done on a face less worn. Her voice was sharp and strained when she spoke, and she watched Vincent's eye with a keenness of which he was vividly conscious; but Lady Western, who did not go deep into looks and meanings, found nothing very unusual in what she said.

"I think Mr Vincent was doubtful of my information," she said. "I heard it last night from Langridge, the groom, who once belonged to my family, you know, Alice; and—and lets me know if anything more than usual happens," she said, abruptly stopping to draw breath. "I travelled all night to get here to-day. Mr Vincent was doubtful of me. Now this matter is cleared up, I daresay he will understand me when I say that I never could have allowed things to go further. I am only a needlewoman, and live in Back Grove Street," continued Mrs Hilyard, recovering gradually as she spoke; "but I have certain things still in my power. Mr Vincent will understand what I mean," she went on, fixing her eyes upon him, and unable to repress an occasional gasp which interrupted her words, "when I say that I should not have suffered it to go further. I should not have shrunk from any sacrifice. My dear, I have been a little shaken and agitated, as you perceive. Mr Vincent wants to keep his eye upon me. Take me with you, Alice," said the

bold woman, once more looking Vincent full in the face; "take charge of me, keep me prisoner until all this is cleared up. I am about tired of living a disguised princess. Send up your people for my possessions here, and take me with you. You will find me safe, Mr Vincent, when you happen to want me, with Lady Western in Grange Lane."

"Oh, Rachel, I am so glad!" cried Lady Western; "I cannot for my life imagine what you mean by keeping you my prisoner, and all that; but Mr Vincent may be very sure you will be safe with me;—since he has so much interest in your movements," continued the young Dowager, turning her perplexed eyes from one to the other. She had not the remotest idea what it all meant. She was perhaps a little surprised to perceive that, after all, Vincent's interest was less with herself than with this strange woman, whose calmness and agitation were equally confusing and unintelligible. "We shall, of course, always be happy to see Mr Vincent in Grange Lane," she concluded, with a somewhat stately courtesy. He did not look at her; he was looking at the other, whose eyes were fixed upon his face. Between these eyes Lady Western, much amazed, could perceive a secret communication passing. What could it mean? The consciousness of this mystery between them which she did not know, annoyed her, notwithstanding her sweet temper.

She withdrew her hand instinctively from Mrs Hilyard's, which she had taken in momentary enthusiasm, and watched their looks of intelligence with half-offended eyes.

"Yes," said the needlewoman, speaking with her eyes fixed upon Vincent, though she did not address him, and making a desperate effort after her usual manner; "I do not think Back Grove Street will do any longer. One may as well take advantage of the accident which has brought our family affairs before the world to come alive again. It is a thing one must do sooner or later. So, if your carriage is close, Alice, I will go home with you. I shall miss Salem," said the audacious woman, "though you are so much less sure about doing good than you used to be, Mr Vincent. If my soul happens to be saved, however," she continued, with a strange softening of her fixed and gleaming eyes—"if that is of much importance, or has any merit in it—you will have had some share in the achievement. You will?" She said the words with a keen sharpness of interrogation, much unlike their more obvious meaning. "You will," she repeated again, more softly—"you will!" Her thin hands came together for a moment in a clasp of mute supplication; her eyes, always hitherto looking down upon him from heights of dark knowledge and experience, looked up in his face with an anguish of entreaty

which startled Vincent. Just at that moment the sounds in the street grew louder, and a voice of authority was audible ordering some one to clear the way. Mrs Hilyard did not speak, but she put out her hand and touched Lady Western's shawl, lifting its long fringes, and twisting them round those fingers on which the marks of her long labour were still visible. She withdrew as she did this her eyes from his face. Her fate was absolutely in his hands.

"Ladies," said Vincent, hoarsely, after vainly trying to clear his agitated voice, "it is better you should leave this place at once. I will see you to your carriage. If I do wrong, the consequences will fall hardest on me. Don't say anything; either way, talking will do little good. You are her shield and defence," he said, looking at Lady Western, with an excitement which he could not quite keep under. "When she touches you, she becomes sacred. You will keep her safe—safe? you will not let her go?"

"Yes; I will keep her safe," said the beauty, opening her lovely astonished eyes. "Is she in danger? Oh, Mr Vincent, your trouble has been too much for you! remember your sister is safe now."

"Is she?" said the minister; he was bitter in his heart, even though that hand was once more laid on his arm. "Safe!—with a broken heart and a ruined

life; but what does that matter? It is all we are good for; though we may go mad and die."

"Oh, not you! not you!" said Lady Western, gazing at him with the tenderest pity in her sweet eyes. "You must not say so; I should be so unhappy." Her beautiful hand pressed his arm with the lightest momentary pressure. She could not help herself; to see suffering and not to do what was in her to soothe it was not possible to her soft heart. Whatever harm that temporary opiate might do, nothing in the world could have prevented her gentle kindness from administering it. She went down the humble stairs leaning on his arm, with Mrs Hilyard following close. The young man put aside the little crowd he himself had collected, and put them in the carriage. He saw them drive away with a kind of despairing exaltation and excitement, and turned to the difficulties which remained to him—to explain himself and send the tardy ministers of justice away. He explained, as he best could, that he had been mistaken, and once more emptied his scanty purse, where there was now little enough left. When he had got rid of the disappointed group about the door, he went home slowly in the reaction of his violence and haste. Susan was safe; was she safe? delivered from this dreadful accusation —allowed to drop back at least with her broken heart

into the deep silences of privacy and uninvadable domestic life. Well, it was a mercy, a great mercy, though he could not realise it. He went home slowly, tingling with the strain of these strange hours; was it Sunday still? was it only an hour ago that Salem had thrilled to the discourse in which his passion and despair had found vent? Vincent neither comprehended himself nor the hours, full of strange fate, which were gliding over him. He went home exhausted, as if with a great conflict; conscious of some relief in his heart, but half unwilling to confess to it, or to realise the means by which it had dawned upon him.

CHAPTER XXIX.

When Vincent entered the house, the sensation of quiet in it struck him with a vague consolation which he could scarcely explain. Perhaps only because it was Sunday; but there was no reproachful landlady, no distracting sound from above—all quiet, Sunday leisure, Sunday decorum, as of old. When he went up hurriedly to his sitting-room, he found two letters lying on his table—one a telegraphic despatch from Dover, the other a dainty little note, which he opened as a man opens the first written communication he receives from the woman of all women. He knew what was in it; but he read it as eagerly as if he expected to find something new in the mild little epistle, with its gentle attempt at congratulation. The news was true. Either remorse had seized upon Mildmay in the prospect of death, or the lingering traditions of honour in his heart had asserted themselves on Susan's behalf. He had declared her entirely

innocent; he had even gone farther, he had sworn that it was only as the companion of his daughter that Susan had accompanied them, and as such that he had treated her. The deposition taken by the magistrates was sent to Vincent in an abridged form, but what it conveyed was clear beyond dispute. So far as the words of this apparently dying man could be received, Susan was spotless—without blood on her hand, or speck upon her good fame. The lesser and the greater guilt were both cleared from that young head which had not been strong enough to wait for this vindication. Though he said, Thank God, from the bottom of his heart, an unspeakable bitterness filled Vincent's soul as he read. Here was a deliverance, full, lavish, unlooked for; but who could tell that the poor girl, crazed with misery, would ever be any the better for it? who could tell whether this vindication might be of any further use than to lighten the cloud upon Susan's grave?

With this thought in his mind he went to the sick-room, where everything seemed quiet, not quite sure that his mother, absorbed as she was in Susan's present danger, could be able to realise the wonderful deliverance which had come to them. But matters were changed there as elsewhere. Between the door and the bed on which Susan lay, a large folding-screen had been set up, and in the darkened space between

this and the door sat Mrs Vincent, with Dr Rider and his wife on each side, evidently persuading and arguing with her on some point which she was reluctant to yield to them. They were talking in whispers under their breath, and a certain air of stillness, of calm and repose, which Vincent could scarcely comprehend, was in the hushed room.

"I assure you, on my word," said Dr Rider, lifting his eyes as Vincent opened the door, and beckoning him softly to come in, "that this change is more than I dared hope for. The chances are she will wake up out of danger. Nothing can be done for her but to keep her perfectly quiet; and my wife will watch, if you will rest;—for our patient's sake!" said the anxious doctor, still motioning Vincent forward, and appealing to him with his eyes.

"Mr Vincent has something to tell you," said the quick little woman, impetuous even in her whisper, who was Dr Rider's wife. "He must not come and talk here. He might wake her. Take him away. Edward, take them both away. Mrs Vincent, you must go and hear what he has to say."

"Oh, Arthur! my dear boy," cried his mother, looking up to him with moist eyes. "It is I who have something to tell. My child is perhaps to get well, Arthur. Oh! my own boy, after all, she is going to get better. We shall have Susan again. Hush!

doctor, please let me go back again; something stirred—I think something stirred; and perhaps she might want something, and the nurse would not observe. Tired?—no, no; I am not tired. I have always watched them when they were ill, all their lives. They never had any nurse in sickness but their mother. Arthur, you know I am not tired. Oh! doctor, perhaps you would order something while he is here, for my son; he has been agitated and anxious, and he is not so strong—not nearly so strong as I am; but, my dear," said the widow, looking up in her son's face with a wistful eagerness, "when Susan gets better, all will be—well."

She said the last words with a trembling, prolonged sigh. Poor mother, in that very moment she had recalled almost for the first time how far from well everything would be. Her face darkened over piteously as she spoke. She rose up, stung into new energy by this dreadful thought, which had been hitherto mercifully obscured by Susan's danger. "Let me go back—don't say anything. Nobody can watch my child but me," said the heartbroken woman; and once more she looked in her son's face. She wanted to read there what had happened—to ascertain from him, without any one else being the wiser, all the dreadful particulars which now, in the first relief of Susan's recovery, had burst into sudden shape upon her sight. "Doctor,

we will not detain you ; her brother and I will watch my child," said Mrs Vincent. The light forsook her eyes as she rose in that new and darker depth of anxiety ; her little figure tottered trying to stand as she held out her hand to her son. " You and me—only you and me, Arthur—we must never leave her ; though everybody is so kind——" said the minister's mother, turning with her smile of martyrdom, though her eyes were blind and she could not see them, to Dr Rider and his wife.

Vincent took his mother's hands and put her tenderly back in her chair. " I have good news, too," he said ; " all will be well, mother dear. This man who has wrought us so much trouble is not dead. I told you, but you did not understand it ; and he declares that Susan——"

" Arthur ! " cried Mrs Vincent, with a sharp outcry of alarm and remonstrance. " Oh, God forgive me ! I will wake my child. Arthur ! The doctor is very good," added the widow, looking round upon them always with the instinct of conciliating Arthur's friends ; " and so is Mrs Rider ; but every family has its private affairs," she concluded, with a wistful, deprecating smile, all the time making signs to Arthur to stop him in his indiscreet revelations. " My dear, you will tell me presently when we are alone."

" Ah, mother," said Vincent, with a suppressed

groan, "there is nothing private now in our family affairs. Hush! listen—Susan is cleared; he swears she had nothing to do with it; he swears that she was his daughter's companion only. Mother! Good heavens! doctor, what has happened? She looks as if she were dying. Mother! What have I done? I have killed her with my good news."

"Hush, hush—she has fainted—all will come right; let us get her away," cried Dr Rider under his breath. Between them the two young men carried her out of the room, which Mrs Rider closed after them with a certain triumph. The widow was not in so deep a faint but the fresher air outside and the motion revived her. It was more a sudden failing of her faculties in the height of emotion than actual insensibility. She made a feeble effort to resist and return into Susan's room. "You will wake her," said Dr Rider in her ear; and the poor mother sank back in their arms, fixing her wistful misty eyes, in which everything swam, upon her son. Her lips moved as she looked at him, though he could not hear her say a word; but the expression in her face, half awakened only from the incomprehension of her swoon, was not to be mistaken or resisted. Vincent bent down over her, and repeated what he had said as he carried her to another room. "Susan is safe—Susan is innocent. It is all over; mother, you understand me?" he said, repeating it

again and again. Mrs Vincent leaned back upon his shoulder with a yielding of all her fatigued frame and worn-out mind. She understood him, not with her understanding as yet, but with her heart, which melted into unspeakable relief and comfort without knowing why. She closed her eyes in that wonderful consciousness of some great mercy that had happened to her; the first time she had closed them voluntarily for many nights and days. When they laid her down on the bed which had been hurriedly prepared for her, her eyes were still closed, and tears stealing softly out under the lids. She could not break out into expressions of thankfulness—the joy went to her heart.

Dr Rider thought it judicious to leave her so, and retired from the bedside with Vincent, not without some anxious curiosity in his own mind to hear all "the rights" of the matter. Perhaps the hum of their voices, quietly though they spoke, aroused her from her trance of silent gratitude. When she called Arthur faintly, and when they both hurried to her, Mrs Vincent was sitting up in her bed wiping off the tears from her cheeks. "Arthur dear," said the widow, "I am quite sure Dr Rider will understand that what he has heard is in the strictest confidence; for to be sure," she continued, with a faint smile breaking over her wan face, "nobody could have any doubt about my Susan. It only had to be set right—and I knew when

my son came home he would set it right," said Mrs Vincent, looking full in Dr Rider's face. "It has all happened because I had not my wits about me as I ought to have had, and was not used to act for myself; but when my son came back—Arthur, my own boy, it was all my fault, but I knew you would set it right—and as for my Susan, nobody could have any doubt; and you will both forgive your poor mother. I don't mind saying this before the doctor," she repeated again once more, looking in his face; "because he has seen us in all our trouble, and I am sure we may trust Dr Rider; but, my dear, you know our private affairs are not to be talked of before strangers—especially," said the widow, with a long trembling sigh of relief and comfort, "when God has been so good to us, and all is to be well."

The two young men looked at each other in silence with a certain awe. All the dreadful interval which had passed between this Sunday afternoon and the day of Susan's return, had been a blank to Mrs Vincent so far as the outer world was concerned. Her daughter's illness and danger had rapt her altogether out of ordinary life. She took up her burden only where it had dropped off from her in the consuming anxiety for Susan's life and reason, in which all other fears had been lost. Just at the point where she had forgotten it, where she had still faced the world with the despair-

ing assumption that all would be right when Arthur returned, she bethought herself now of that frightful shadow which had never been revealed in its full horror to her eyes. Now that Arthur's assurance relieved her heart of that, the widow took up her old position instinctively. She knew nothing of the comments in the newspapers, the vulgar publicity to which poor Susan's story had come. She wanted to impress upon Dr Rider's mind, by way of making up for her son's imprudence, that he was specially trusted, and that she did not mind speaking before him because he had seen all their trouble. Such was the poor mother's idea as she sat upon the bed where they had carried her, wiping the tears of joy from her wan and worn face. She forgot all the weary days that had come and gone. She took up the story just at the point where she, after all her martyrdom and strenuous upholding of Arthur's cause, had suddenly sunk into Susan's sick-room and left it. Now she reappeared with Arthur's banner once more in her hands—always strong in that assumption that nobody could doubt as to Susan, and that Arthur had but to come home to set all right. Dr Rider held up his warning finger when he saw Vincent about to speak. This delusion was salvation to the widow.

"But I must go back to Susan, doctor," said Mrs Vincent. "If she should wake and find a stranger

there!—though Mrs Rider is so kind. But I am much stronger than I look—watching never does me any harm; and now that my mind is easy—People don't require much sleep at my time of life. And, Arthur, when my dear child sees me, she will know that all is well—all is well," repeated the widow, with trembling lips. "I must go to Susan, doctor; think if she should wake!"

"But she must not wake," said Dr Rider; "and if you stay quietly here she will not wake, for my wife will keep everything still. You will have a great deal to do for her when she *is* awake and conscious. Now you must rest."

"I shall have a great deal to do for her? Dr Rider means she will want nursing, Arthur," said Mrs Vincent, "after such an illness; but she might miss me even in her sleep, or she might——"

"Mother, you must rest, for Susan's sake; if you make yourself ill, who will be able to take care of her?" said Vincent, who felt her hand tremble in his, and saw with how much difficulty she sustained the nervous shivering of her frame. She looked up into his face with those anxious eyes which strove to read his without being able to comprehend all the meanings there. Then the widow turned with a feminine artifice to Dr Rider.

"Doctor, if you will bring me word that my child

is still asleep—if you will tell me exactly what you think, and that she is going on well," said Mrs Vincent; "you are always so kind. Oh, Arthur, my dear boy," cried the widow, taking his hand and caressing it between her own, "now that he is gone, tell me. Is it quite true?—is all well again? but you must never bring in Susan's name. Nobody must have it in their power to say a word about your sister, Arthur dear. And, oh, I hope you have been prudent and not said anything among your people. Hush! he will be coming back; is it quite true, Arthur? Tell me that my dear child has come safe out of it all, and nothing has happened. Tell me! Oh, speak to me, Arthur dear!"

"It is quite true," said Vincent, meeting his mother's eyes with a strange blending of pity and thankfulness. He did not say enough to satisfy her. She drew him closer, looking wistfully into his face. The winter afternoon was darkening, the room was cold, the atmosphere dreary. The widow held her son close, and fixed upon him her anxious inquiring eyes. "It is quite true, Arthur! There is nothing behind that you are hiding from me?" she said, with her lips almost touching his cheek, and her wistful eyes searching his meaning. "Oh, my dear boy, don't hide anything from me. I am able to bear it, Arthur. Whatever it is, I ought to know."

"What I have told you is the simple truth, mother," said Vincent, not without a pang. "He has made a declaration before the magistrates——"

Mrs Vincent started so much that the bed on which she sat shook. "Before the magistrates!" she said, with a faint cry. Then after a pause—"But, thank God, it is not here, Arthur, nor at Lonsdale, nor anywhere where we are known. And he said that—that—he had never harmed my child? Oh, Arthur, Arthur—your sister!—that she should ever be spoken of so! And he was not killed? I do not understand it, my dear. I cannot see all the rights of it; but it is a great comfort to have you to myself for a moment, and to feel as if perhaps things might come right again. Hush! I think the doctor must be coming. Speak very low. My dear boy, you don't mean it, but you are imprudent; and, oh, Arthur, with a troublesome flock like yours you must not commit yourself! You must not let your sister's name be talked of among the people. Hush, hush, I hear the doctor at the door."

And the widow put her son away from her, and leant her head upon her hands instead of on his shoulder. She would not even let the doctor suppose that she had seized that moment to inquire further, or that she was anything but sure and confident that all was going well.

"She is in the most beautiful sleep," said the enthusiastic doctor, "and Nettie is by her. Now, Mrs Vincent, here is something you must take; and when you wake up again I will take you to your daughter, and I have very little doubt you will find her on the fair way for recovery—recovery in every sense," added Dr Rider, incautiously; "twice saved—and I hope you will have no more of such uneasiness as you have suffered on her behalf."

"Indeed, I have had very little uneasiness with my children," said Mrs Vincent, drawing up her little figure on the bed. "Susan never had a severe illness before. When she came here first she was suffering from a—a bad fright, doctor. I told you so at the time; and I was so weak and so alarmed, Arthur dear, that I fear Dr Rider has misunderstood me. When one is not much used to illness," said the mother, with her pathetic jesuitry, "one thinks there never was anything so bad as one's own case, and I was foolish and upset. Yes, I will take it, doctor. Now that I am easy in my mind, I will take anything you please; and you will let me know if she wakes, or if she stirs. Whatever happens, you will let me know that moment? Arthur, you will see that they let me know."

The doctor promised, anxiously putting the draught into her hands: he would have promised any impos-

sible thing at the moment, so eager was he to get her persuaded to rest.

"I have not talked so much for—I wonder how long it is?" said the widow, with a faint smile. "Oh, Arthur dear, I feel as if somehow a millstone had been on my heart, and God had taken it off. Doctor, it is—it is—all your doing, under Providence," said the little woman, looking full in his face. Perhaps she believed it—at least she meant him to believe so. She swallowed the draught he gave her with that smile upon her face, and laid down her throbbing head in the quietness and darkness. "Go with the doctor, Arthur dear," she said, denying the yearning in her heart to question her son farther, lest Dr Rider might perhaps suppose all was not so well as she said; "and, oh be sure to tell me the very moment that Susan wakes?" She watched them gliding noiselessly out of the room, two dark figures, in the darkness. She lay down alone, throbbing all over with thrills of pain, which were half pleasure. She began to be conscious again of her own body and life; and the wistful curiosity that possessed her was not strong enough to neutralise the positive unmistakable joy. Susan was recovering. Susan was innocent. What trouble could there be heavy enough to take away the comfort out of words like these!

"Now she will sleep. Mr Vincent, I congratulate

you on having such pure blood in your veins; not robust, you know, but far better—such sweet, perfect health as one rarely meets with nowadays," said the doctor, under his breath, with professional enthusiasm; "all the better for your sister that she came of such a stock. My wife, now, is another example—not robust, as I say—natures delicately organised, but in such exquisite adjustment, and with such elasticity! Mrs Vincent will go to sleep like a baby, and wake able for—anything that God may please to send her," said Dr Rider with reverence. "They will both sleep till to-morrow if all goes well. Hush!—Well, I may be absurd, for neither of them could hear us here; but still it is best to err on the safe side."

"But Susan—you are not deceiving us—Susan is——" said Vincent, with sudden alarm.

"She is asleep," said Dr Rider; "and, if I can, I will remain till she wakes; it is life or death."

They parted thus—the doctor to the little room below-stairs, where Vincent's dinner awaited him, and the young minister himself to his own room, where he went into the darkness with a kind of bewildered uncertainty and incomprehension of the events about him. To think that this day, with all its strange encounters and unexpected incidents, was Sunday, as he suddenly remembered it to be—that this morning he had preached, and this evening had to preach again,

completed in Vincent's mind the utter chaos and disturbance of ordinary life. It struck him dumb to remember that by-and-by he must again ascend the pulpit, and go through all his duties. Was he an impostor, doing all this mechanically? He debated the question dully in his own mind, as he sat too much bewildered to do anything else in the dark in his bed-chamber, pondering with a certain confused gravity and consolation over all that had happened. But faculties, which are confused by sudden comfort and relief, are very different from faculties obscured and confounded by suffering. He sat vaguely in the dark, wondering over his strange position. This morning, even in the height of his despair, he had at least some idea what he was going to do in that pulpit of Salem. It was a sacrifice—a martyrdom to accomplish—a wild outcry and complaint to pour forth to the world. This evening he sat wasting the precious moments in the soft darkness, without knowing a word of what he was to say—without being able to realise the fact, that by-and-by he should have to go out through the sharp air echoing with church-bells—to see once more all those watchful faces turned upon him, and to communicate such instruction as was in him to his flock. A sense of exhaustion and satisfaction was in Vincent's heart. He sat listless in a vague comfort and weariness, his head throbbing with the fumes of his past

excitement, yet not aching. It was only now that he realised the rolling off from his head of this dark cloud of horror and shame. Susan was recovering—Susan was innocent. He became aware of the facts much in the same way as his mother became aware of them ere she dropped to sleep in the blessed darkness of the adjoining room. Confused as he was, with his brain still full of the pulsations of the past, he was so far conscious of what had happened. He sat in his reverie, regardless of the time, and everything else that he ought to have attended to. The little maid came and knocked at his door to say his dinner had been waiting for an hour, and he answered, "Yes; he was coming," but sat still in the darkness. Then the landlady herself, compunctious, beginning to feel the thrills of returning comfort which had entered her house, came tapping softly to say it was near six, and wouldn't Mr Vincent take something before it was time for chapel? Mr Vincent said "Yes" again, but did not move; and it was only when he heard the church-bells tingling into the night air that he got up at last, and, stealing first to the door of Susan's room, where he ascertained that she still slept, and then to his mother's, where he could hear her soft regular breathing in the darkness, he went away in an indescribably exalted condition of mind to Salem and his duty. There is a kind of weakness incident to

excitement of mind and neglect of body, which is akin to the ecstatic state in which men dream dreams and see visions. Vincent was in that condition to-night. He was not careful what anybody would say or think; he no longer pictured to himself the upturned faces in Salem, all conscious of the tragedy which was connected with his name. The sense of deliverance in his heart emancipated him, and gave a contrary impulse to his thoughts. In the weakness of an excited and exhausted frame, a certain gleam of the ineffable and miraculous came over the young man. He was again in the world where God stoops down to change with one touch of His finger the whole current of man's life—the world of childhood, of genius, of faith; that other world, dark sphere of necessity and fate, where nothing could stay the development into dread immortality of the obstinate human intelligence, and where dreary echoes of speculation still questioned whether any change were possible in heart and spirit, or if saving souls were a mere figure of speech, floated away far off over his head, a dark fiction of despair. In this state of mind he went back to the pulpit where, in the morning, he had thrilled his audience with all those wild complications of thought which end in nothing. Salem was again crowded—not a corner of the chapel remained unfilled; and again, many of the more zealous members were driven out

of their seats by the influx of the crowd. Vincent, who had no sermon to preach, and nothing except the fulness that was in his heart to say, took up again his subject of the morning. He told his audience with the unpremeditated skill of a natural orator, that while Reason considered all the desperate chances, and concluded that wonderful work impossible, God, with the lifting of His countenance, with the touch of His power, made the darkness light before Him, and changed the very earth and heavens around the wondering soul. Lifted out of the region of reasonableness himself, he explained to his astonished audience how Reason halts in her conclusions, how miracle and wonder are of all occurrences the most natural, and how, between God and man, there are no boundaries of possibility. It was a strange sermon, without any text or divisions, irregular in its form, sometimes broken in its utterance; but the man who spoke was in a "rapture"—a state of fasting and ecstasy. He saw indistinctly that there were glistening eyes in the crowd, and felt what was somewhat an unusual consciousness—that his heart had made communications to other hearts in his audience almost without his knowing it; but he did not observe that nobody came to the vestry to congratulate him, that Tozer looked disturbed, and that the deacons averted their benign countenances. When he had done his work, he went

home without waiting to talk to anybody—without, indeed, thinking any more of Salem—through the crowd, in the darkness, passing group after group in earnest discussion of the minister. He went back still in that exalted condition of mind, unaware that he passed Mrs Tozer and Phœbe, who were much disposed to join him—and was in his own house sooner than most of his congregation. All within was quiet, lost in the most grateful and profound stillness. Sleep seemed to brood over the delivered house. Vincent spoke to the doctor, who still waited, and whose hopes were rising higher and higher, and then ate something, and said his prayers, and went to rest like a child. The family, so worn out with labour, and trial, and sorrow, slept profoundly under the quiet stars. Those hard heavens, from which an indifferent God saw the Innocents murdered and made no sign, had melted into the sweet natural firmament, above which the great Father watches unwearied. The sudden change was more than mere deliverance to the young Nonconformist. He slept and took rest in the sweet surprise and thankfulness of his soul. His life and heart, still young and incapable of despair, had got back out of hard anguishes and miseries which no one could soften, to the sweet miraculous world in which circumstances are always changing, and God interferes for ever.

CHAPTER XXX.

When Vincent awoke next morning, his mother was standing by his bedside. Her eyes were dewy and moist, a faint tinge of colour was on her sweet old cheek, and her steps tottered a little as she came up to his bed, and stooped to kiss him. "Oh, Arthur, my dear boy, she knows me!" said Mrs Vincent, putting up her hand to her eyes. "I must not be away from her a moment, but I could not resist coming to tell you. She knows me, dear. Make haste and dress, and come and see your sister, Arthur; and I will give orders about your breakfast as I go back. My dear, I know you have been anxious," said the widow, putting back his hair fondly with the soft little hand which still trembled; "though men have not the way of showing it, I know you have been very anxious. You looked quite pale and thin as you slept. But I must speak to the landlady now and see about your food. Come to Susan's room as soon as you are dressed, and

I will order your breakfast, my dear boy," said his mother, going softly out again, with her tender little figure all beautified and trembling with joy. Mrs Vincent met the landlady near the door, and stopped to speak to her. "My daughter is a great deal better," said the minister's mother. "I have been so anxious, I have never been able to thank you as I ought to have done for your kindness and attention. We have been as quiet as if we had been at home. We will all remember your attention, though I have never been able to thank you before; and I am sure it is very gratifying to my son to think it is one of his own flock who has taken so much pains for us. Mr Vincent has been very anxious about his sister," continued the widow; "I fear he has not been taking his food, nor keeping his regular time for meals. You would oblige me very much if you would try to have something nice for his breakfast. We were all much shaken yesterday, being so anxious;—some new-laid eggs perhaps—though I know they are scarce in a town at this time of the year—or anything you can think of that will tempt him to eat. I would not say so much," said Mrs Vincent, smiling upon the astonished landlady, and leaning to support her own weakness on the rail of the passage upon which the staircase opened, "but that I know your kind interest in your minister. I am sure you will take all the pains you can to get him to attend to

his precious health. Thank you. I am very much obliged."

With this the little woman passed on, feeling indeed too weak to stand longer; and leaving the landlady, who had intended to mingle some statement of her own grievances with her congratulations, with the plea quietly taken out of her hands, and the entire matter disposed of. Mrs Vincent was moving back again to the sick-room, when the door opened down-stairs, and some one asked for Mr Vincent, and came up hurriedly. The minister's mother recognised Tozer's voice, and made a pause. She was glad of the opportunity to make sure that all was well in the flock. She leant over the railing to shake hands with the butterman, moved to a little effusion of thankfulness by the recollection of the state of anxiety she was in when she saw him last.

"My son is not up yet," she said. "We were very anxious yesterday. It was the crisis of the fever, and everything depended upon it. I daresay you would see how anxious Mr Vincent was; but, thank heaven, now all is going on well."

"You see, ma'am," said Tozer, "it must have all been on the nerves, and to be sure there ain't nothing more likely to be serviceable than good news. It's in the paper this morning. As soon as I see it, I said to my missis, 'This is why the minister was so pecooliar

yesterday.' I divined it in a moment, ma'am; though it wasn't to say prudent, Mrs Vincent, and not as you would have advised no more nor myself, to fly off like that out of chapel, without as much as shaking hands with one o' the deacons. But I make allowances, I do; and when I see it in the paper, I said to my missis, 'It's all along o' this Mr Vincent was so queer.' I don't doubt as it'll be quite looked over, and thought no more of, when it's known what's the news."

"What news?" said Mrs Vincent, faintly, holding fast by the railing. "You mean the news of my dear child's recovery," she added, after a breathless pause. "Have they put it in the papers? I am sure it is very good, but I never heard of such a thing before. She has been very ill to be sure—but most people are very ill once in their lives," said the widow, gasping a little for breath, and fixing her eyes upon the paper which Tozer held in his hand.

"Poor soul!" said the deacon, compassionately, "it ain't no wonder, considering all things. Phœbe would have come the very first day to say, Could she be of any use? but her mother wasn't agreeable. Women has their own ways of managing; but they'll both come to-day, now all's cleared up, if you'll excuse me. And now, ma'am, I'll go on to the minister, and see if there's anything as he'd like me to do, for Pigeon and the rest was put out, there's no denying of it; but if

things is set straight directly, what with this news, and what with them sermons yesterday, I don't think as it'll do no harm. I said to him, as this Sunday was half the battle," said the worthy butterman, reflectively; "and he did his best—I wouldn't say as he didn't do his best; and I'm not the man as will forsake my pastor when he's in trouble. Good-morning, ma'am; and my best respects to miss, and I hope as she'll soon be well again. There ain't no man as could rejoice more nor me at this news."

Tozer went on to Vincent's room, at the door of which the minister had appeared summoning him with some impatience and anxiety. "News? what news?" said Mrs Vincent, faintly to herself, as she held by the rail and felt the light forsaking her eyes in a new mist of sudden dread. She caught the look of the landlady at that moment, a look of half-pity, curiosity, and knowledge, which startled her back to her defences. With sudden firmness she gathered herself together, and went on to the sick-room, leaving behind her, as she closed the door, the whole troubled world, which seemed to know better about her most intimate affairs than she did; and those newspapers, which somehow mentioned Susan's name, that sweet maiden name which it was desecration to see so much as named in print. Rather the widow carried that uneasy world in with her to the sick-room which she had left a few

minutes before in all the effusion of unhoped-for joy. Everything still was not well though Susan was getting better. She sat down by the bedside where Susan lay languid and pale, showing the change in her by little more than quietness and a faint recognition of her mother, and in her troubled heart began to look the new state of affairs in the face, and to make up her mind that more of the causes of Susan's illness than she had supposed known, must have become public. And then Arthur and his flock, that flock which he evidently had somehow affronted on the previous day. Mrs Vincent pondered with all the natural distrust of a woman over Arthur's imprudence. She almost chafed at her necessary confinement by her daughter's bedside; if she herself, who had been a minister's wife for thirty years, and knew the ways of a congregation, and how it must be managed, could only get into the field to bring her son out of the difficult passages which she had no faith in his own power to steer through! So the poor mother experienced how, when absorbing grief is removed, a host of complicated anxieties hasten in to fill up its place. She was no longer bowed down under an overwhelming dread, but she was consumed by restless desires to be doing—cravings to know all—fears for what might at the moment be happening out of her range and influence. What might Arthur, always incautious, be confiding

to Tozer even now?—perhaps telling him those "private affairs" which the widow would have defended against exposure with her very life—perhaps chafing at Salem and rejecting that yoke which, being a minister, he must bear. It was all Mrs Vincent could do to keep herself still on her chair, and to maintain that quietness which was necessary for Susan. If only she could have been there to soften his impatience and make the best of his unnecessary confidences! Many a time before this, the widow had been compelled to submit to that female tribulation—to be shut up apart, and leave the great events outside to be transacted by those incautious masculine hands, in which, at the bottom of her heart, a woman seldom has perfect confidence when her own supervising influence is withdrawn. Mrs Vincent felt instinctively that Arthur would commit himself as she sat resigned but troubled by Susan's bed.

Tozer went directly to the door of Vincent's room, where the minister, only half-dressed, but much alarmed to see the colloquy which was going on between his mother and the butterman, was waiting for him. The deacon squeezed the young man's hand with a hearty pressure. His aspect was so fatherly and confidential, that it brought back to the mind of the young Nonconformist a certain rueful half-comic recollection of the suppers in the back parlour, and all the old troubles of the pastor of Salem, which heavier shadows had

driven out of his mind. Tozer held up triumphantly the paper in his hand.

"You've seen it, sir?" said the butterman; "first thing I did this morning was to look up whether there wasn't nothing about it in the latest intelligence; for the 'Gazette' has been very particular, knowing, at Carlingford, folks would be interested—and here it is sure enough, Mr Vincent; and we nigh gave three cheers, me and the lads in the shop."

To this Vincent listened with a darkening brow and an impatience which he did not attempt to conceal. He took the paper with again that quick sense of the intolerable which prompted him to tear the innocent broadsheet in pieces and tread it under foot. The 'Gazette' contained, with a heading in large characters, the following paragraph:—

"THE DOVER TRAGEDY.

"Our readers will be glad to hear that the unfortunate young lady whose name has been so unhappily mixed up in this mysterious affair, is likely to be fully exonerated from the charge rashly brought against her. In the deposition of the wounded man, which was taken late on Saturday night, by Mr Everett, the stipendiary magistrate of Dover, he distinctly declares that Miss —— was not the party who fired the pistol, nor in any way connected with it—that she had ac-

companied his daughter merely as companion on a hasty journey, and that, in short, instead of the romantic connection supposed to subsist between the parties, with all the passions of love and revenge naturally involved, the ties between them were of the simplest and most temporary character. We are grieved to add, that the fright and horror of her awful position had overpowered Miss —— some time before this deposition was made, and brought on a brain-fever, which, of course, made the unfortunate young lady, who is understood to possess great personal attractions, quite unable to explain the suspicious circumstances surrounding her. We have now only to congratulate her respectable family and friends on her exoneration from a very shocking charge, and hope her innocence will soon be confirmed by full legal acquittal. Our readers will find Colonel Mildmay's deposition on another page. It will be perceived that he obstinately refuses to indicate who was the real perpetrator of the deed. Suspicion has been directed to his groom, who accompanied him, in whom, however, the wounded man seems to repose perfect confidence. He is still in a precarious state, but little doubt is entertained of his ultimate recovery."

"There, Mr Vincent, that's gratifying, that is," said Tozer, as Vincent laid down the paper; "and I come

over directly I see it, to let you know. And I come to say besides," continued the butterman with some diffidence, "as I think if you and me was to go off to Mr Brown the solicitor, and give him his orders as he was to put in bail for Miss —— or anything else as might be necessary—not meaning to use no disagreeable words, as there ain't no occasion now," said the good deacon; "but only to make it plain, as you and me is responsible for her, if so be as she was ever to be called for again. It would be the thing to do, that would, sir, if you take my advice. It ain't altogether my own notion, but was put into my head by one as knows. The gentleman as come here from Dover inquiring into the business was the one as suggested it to me. He turned out uncommon obliging, and wasn't to say no trouble in the house; and when word came as the Colonel wasn't dead, he went away as civil as could be. I'll go with you cheerful to Mr Brown, if you'll take my advice, afore Mrs Vincent gets moving about again, or the young lady knows what's a-going on; that's what I'd do, sir, if it was me."

Vincent grasped the exultant butterman's hand in an overflow of gratitude and compunction. "I shall never forget your kindness," he said, with a little tremor in his voice. "You have been a true friend. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I will go at once, and accept this other great kindness from you.

I shall never forget what I owe to you as long as I live."

"I never was the man to forsake my pastor in trouble —not to say a young man like you as is a credit to the connection, and the best preacher I may say as I ever heard in Salem," said Tozer, with effusion, returning the grasp; "but we ain't a-going a step till you've had your breakfast. Your good mother, Mrs Vincent, as is a real lady, sir, and would never advise you different from what I would myself, being for your own interests, would have little opinion of me if I took you out on a Monday mornin' after your labours without so much as a bit o' breakfast to sustain you. I'll sit by you while you're a-eating of your bacon. There's a deal to consider of concerning Salem as I couldn't well bring before you as long as you were in such trouble. Them were uncommon sermons, sir, yesterday; I don't know as I ever heard anything as was just to be compared with the mornin' discourse, and most of the flock was of my opinion; but what is the good of standing up for the pastor — I ask you candid, Mr Vincent — when he'll not take no pains to keep things square? I'm speaking plain, for you can't mistake me as it's anything but your own interests I am a-thinking of. We was all marching in, deacons and committee and all, to say as we was grateful to you for your instructions, and wishing you well out of your trouble—and I was in

great hopes as matters might have been made up—when behold, what we finds was the vestry empty and the pastor gone! Now, I ain't a-finding fault. Them news would explain anything; but I don't deny as Pigeon and the rest was put out; and if you'll be guided by one as wishes you well, Mr Vincent, when you've done our business as is most important of all, you'll go and make some visits, sir, and make yourself agreeable, if you'll excuse me. It ain't with no selfish thoughts as I speak," said Tozer, energetically. "It's not like asking of you to come a-visiting to me, nor setting myself forward as the minister's great friend—though we *was* remarking as the pastor was unknown in our house this fortnight and more—but it's for peace and union, Mr Vincent, and the good of the flock, sir, and to keep—as your good mother well knows ain't easy in a congregation—all things straight."

When this little peroration was delivered, Vincent was seated at table, making what he could of the breakfast, in which both his mother and Tozer had interested themselves. It was with a little effort that the young man accepted this advice as the character and intentions of his adviser deserved. He swallowed what was unpalatable in the counsel, and received the suggestion "in as sweet a frame of mind as I could wish to see," as Tozer afterwards described.

"I will go and make myself agreeable," said the

minister, with a smile. "Thank heaven! it is not so impossible to-day as it might have been yesterday; I left the chapel so hurriedly, because——"

"I understand, sir," said Tozer, benevolently interposing as Vincent paused, finding explanation impossible. "Pigeon and the rest was put out, as I say, more nor I could see was reasonable—not as Pigeon is a man that knows his own mind. It's the women as want the most managing. Now, Mr Vincent, I'm ready, sir, if you are, and we won't lose no time."

Before going out, however, Vincent went to his sister's room. She was lying in an utter quietness which went to his heart;—silent, no longer uttering the wild fancies of a disordered brain, recovering, as the doctor thought; but stretched upon her white couch, marble white, without any inclination apparently to lift the heavy lids of her eyes, or to notice anything that passed before her—a very sad sight to see. By her sat her mother, in a very different condition, anxious, looking into Arthur's eyes, whispering counsels in his ears. "Oh, my dear boy, be very careful," said Mrs Vincent; "your dear papa always said that a minister's flock was his first duty; and now that Susan is getting better, O Arthur! you must not let people talk about your sister;—and have patience, O have patience, dear!" This was said in wistful whispers, with looks which only half confided in Arthur's prudence; and the widow

sank into her chair when he left her, folding her hands in a little agony of self-restraint and compulsory quietness. She felt equal for it herself, if she had been at liberty to go out upon the flock once more in Arthur's cause; but who could tell how he might commit himself, he who was a young man, and took his own way, and did not know, as Tozer said, how to keep all things straight? When Mrs Vincent thought of her son in personal conflict with Mrs Pigeon, she lost faith in Arthur. She herself might have conquered that difficult adversary, but what weapons had he to bring forth against the deacon's wife, he who was only a minister and a man?

CHAPTER XXXI.

"AND now that's settled, as far as we can settle it now," said Tozer, as they left the magistrate's office, where John Brown, the famous Carlingford solicitor, had accompanied them, "you'll go and see some of the chapel folks, Mr Vincent? It'll be took kind of you to lose no time, especially if you'd say a word just as it's all over, and let them know the news is true."

"I will go with you first," said Vincent, who contemplated the butterman's shop at that moment through a little halo of gratitude and kindness. He went into the back parlour with the gratified deacon, where Mrs Tozer sat reading over again the same 'Gazette' in which poor Susan's history was summed up and ended. It seemed like a year to Vincent since he had dined with his mother at this big table, amid the distant odours of all the bacon and cheese. Mrs Tozer put down the paper, and took off her spectacles as her visitor came in. "It's Mr Vincent, Phœbe,"

she said, with a little exclamation. "Dear, dear, I never thought as the pastor would be such a strange sight in my house—not as I was meaning nothing unkind, Tozer, so there's no occasion to look at me. I'm as glad as ever I can be to see the minister; and what a blessing as it's all settled, and the poor dear getting well, too. Phœbe, you needn't be a-hiding behind me, child, as if the pastor was thinking of how you was dressed. She has on her morning wrapper, Mr Vincent, as she was helping her mother in, and we didn't expect no visitors. Don't be standing there, as if it was any matter to the minister how you was dressed."

"Oh, ma, as if I ever thought of such a thing!" said Phœbe, extending a pink uncovered arm out of the loose sleeve of her morning dress to Vincent, and averting her face; "but to see Mr Vincent is so like old times—and everything *has* seemed so different—and it *is* so pleasant to feel as if it were all coming back again. Oh ma! to imagine that I ever supposed Mr Vincent could notice my dress, or think of poor me!" added Phœbe, in a postscript under her breath. The minister heard the latter words quite as well as the first. After he had shaken the pink, plump hand, he sat down on the opposite side of the table, and saw Phœbe, relieved against the light of the window, wiping a tender tear from her eye. All at once out of the darker and heavier trials which had abstracted him

from common life, the young Nonconformist plunged back into the characteristic troubles of his position. As usual, he made no response to Phœbe, found nothing civil to say, but turned with desperation to Mrs Tozer, who was luckily about to speak.

"Don't pay no attention to her, Mr Vincent; she's a deal too feelin'. She oughtn't to be minded, and then she'll learn better," said Mrs Tozer. "I am sure it wasn't no wish of ours as you should ever stop away. If we had been your own relations we couldn't have been more took up; and where should a minister seek for sympathy if it isn't in his own flock? There ain't nobody so safe to put your trust in, Mr Vincent, as Salem folks. There's a many fine friends a young man may have when he's in a prosperous way, but it ain't to be supposed they would stand by him in trouble; and it's then as you find the good of your real friends," continued Mrs Tozer, looking with some significance at her husband. Tozer, for his own part, rubbed his hands and stationed himself with his back to the fire, as is the custom of Englishmen of all degrees. The husband and wife contemplated Vincent with complacence. With the kindest feelings in the world, they could not altogether restrain a little triumph. It was impossible now that the minister could mistake who were his true friends.

But just then, strangely enough, a vision of a tender

smile, a glance up in his face, the touch of a soft hand, came to Vincent's mind. His fine friends! he had but one, and she had stood by him in his trouble. From Tozer's complacence the minister's mind went off with a bound of relief to that sweet, fruitless sympathy which was dearer than help. From her soft perfumy presence to Mrs Tozer's parlour, with that pervading consciousness in it of the shop hard by and its store of provisions, what a wonderful difference! It was not so easy to be grateful as he had at first thought.

"Mr Tozer has been my real friend indeed, and a most honest and thorough one," said Vincent. "But I don't think I have any other in Salem so sure and steady," added the minister, after a little pause, half gratefully, half in bitterness. This sentiment was not, however, resented by the assembled family. Phœbe leaned over her mother's chair, and whispered, "Oh, ma, dear! didn't I always say he was full of feeling?" somewhat to the discomfiture of the person commented on; while Tozer himself beamed upon the minister from before the blazing fire.

"I said as we'd pull you through," said Tozer, "and I said as I'd stand by you; and both I'll do, sir, you take my word, if you'll but stick to your duty; and as for standing bail in a hundred pound or two," continued the butterman, magnanimously, "for a poor young creature as couldn't be nothing but innocent, I

don't mind that, nor a deal more than that, to keep all things straight. It's nothing but my duty. When a man is a responsible man, and well-known in a place, it's his business to make use of his credit, Mr Vincent, sir, and his character, for the good of his friends."

"It may be your duty, but you know there ain't a many as would have done it," said his straightforward wife, "as Mr Vincent sees himself, and no need for nobody a-telling of him. There ain't a many as would have stood up for the pastor, right and wrong, and finished off with the likes of this, and the minister don't need us to say so. Dear, dear, Mr Vincent, you ain't a-going away already, and us hasn't so much as seen you for I can't tell how long? I made sure you'd stop and take a bit of dinner at least, not making no ceremony," said Mrs Tozer, "for there's always enough for a friend, and you can't take us wrong."

Vincent had risen hurriedly to his feet, under the strong stimulant of the butterman's self-applause. Conscious as he was of all that Tozer had really done, the minister found it hard to listen and echo, with due humility and gratitude, the perfect satisfaction of the pair over their own generosity. He had no thanks to say when thus forestalled. "Oh, ma, how can you make so much of it?" cried Phœbe. "The minister will think us *so* selfish; and, oh, please Mr Vincent, when you go home, will you speak to your mother, and

ask her to let me come and help with her nursing? I should do whatever she told me, and try to be a comfort to her—oh, I should indeed!" said Phœbe, clasping those pink hands. "Nobody could be more devoted than I should be." She cast down her eyes, and stood the image of maidenly devotedness between Vincent and the window. She struck him dumb, as she always did. He never was equal to the emergency where Phœbe was concerned. He took up his hat in his hands, and tried to explain lamely how he must go away—how he had visits to make—duties to do—and would have stuck fast, and lost Mrs Tozer's favour finally and for ever, had not the butterman interposed.

"It's me as is to blame," said the worthy deacon. "If it hadn't have been as the pastor wouldn't pass the door without coming in, I'd not have had him here to-day; and if you women would think, you'd see. We're stanch—and Mr Vincent ain't no call to trouble himself about us; but Pigeon and them, you see, as went off in a huff yesterday—that's what the minister has got to do. You shan't be kep' no longer, sir, in my house. Duty afore pleasure, that's my maxim. Good mornin', and I hope as you won't meet with no unpleasantness; but if you should, Mr Vincent, don't be disheartened, sir—we'll pull you through."

With this encouraging sentiment, Vincent was released from Mrs Tozer's parlour. He drew a long

breath when he got out to the fresh air in the street, and faced the idea of the Pigeons and other recusants whom he was now bound to visit. While he thought of them, all so many varieties of Mrs Tozer's parlour, without the kindness which met him there, the heart of the young Nonconformist failed him. Nothing but gratitude to Tozer could have sent him forth at all on this mission of conciliation; but now on the threshold of it, smarting from even Tozer's well-intentioned patronage, a yearning for a little personal comfort seized upon Vincent's mind. It was his duty to go away towards Grove Street, where the poulterer's residence was; but his longing eyes strayed towards Grange Lane, where consolation dwelt. And, besides, was it not his duty to watch over the real criminal, for whose mysterious wickedness poor Susan had suffered? It was not difficult to foresee how that argument would conclude. He wavered for a few minutes opposite Masters's shop, gave a furtive glance back towards the butterman's, and then, starting forward with sudden resolution, took his hasty way to Lady Western's door; only for a moment; only to see that all was safe, and his prisoner still in custody. Vincent sighed over the thought with an involuntary quickening of his heart. To be detained in such custody, the young man thought, would be sweeter than heaven; and the wild hope which came and went like a meteor about his path,

sprang up with sudden intensity, and took the breath from his lips, and the colour from his cheek, as he entered at that green garden door.

Lady Western was by herself in the drawing-room—that room divided in half by the closed doors which Vincent remembered so well. She rose up out of the low chair in which she reposed, like some lovely swan amid billows of dark silken drapery, and held out her beautiful hand to him—both her beautiful hands—with an effusion of kindness and sympathy. The poor young Nonconformist took them into his own, and forgot the very existence of Salem. The sweetness of the moment took all the sting out of his fate. He looked at her without saying anything, with his heart in his eyes. Consolation! It was all he had come for. He could have gone away thereafter and met all the Pigeons in existence; but more happiness still was in store for him—she pointed to a chair on the other side of her work-table. There was nobody else near to break the charm. The silken rustle of her dress, and that faint perfume which she always had about her, pervaded the rosy atmosphere. Out of purgatory, out of bitter life beset with trouble, the young man had leaped for one moment into paradise; and who could wonder that he resigned himself to the spell?

"I am so glad you have come," said Lady Western. "I am sure you must have hated me, and everything

that recalled my name; but it was impossible for any one to be more grieved than I was, Mr Vincent. Now, will you tell me about Rachel? She sits by herself in her own room. When I go in she gives me a look of fright which I cannot understand. Fright! Can you imagine Rachel frightened, Mr Vincent—and of me!"

"Ah, yes. I would not venture to come into the presence of the angels if I had guilt on my hands," said Vincent, not very well knowing what he said.

"Mr Vincent! what can you mean? You alarm me very much," said the young Dowager; "but perhaps it is about her little girl. I don't think she knows where her daughter is. Indeed," said Lady Western, with a cloud on her beautiful face, "you must not think I ever approved of my brother's conduct; but when he was so anxious to have his child, I think she might have given in to him a little—don't you think so? The child might have done him good perhaps. She is very lovely, I hear. Did you see her? Oh, Mr Vincent, tell me about it. I cannot understand how you are connected with it at all. She trusted in you so much, and now she is afraid of you. Tell me how it is. Hush! she is ringing her bell. She has seen you come into the house."

"But I don't want to see Mrs—Mrs Mildmay," said Vincent, rising up. "I don't know why I came at all, if it were not to see the sun shining. It is dark down

below where I am," said the young man, with an involuntary outburst of the passion which at that moment suddenly appeared to him in all its unreasonableness. "Forgive me. It was only a longing I had to see the light."

Lady Western looked up with her sweet eyes in the minister's face. She was not ignorant of the condition of mind he was in, but she was sorry for him to the bottom of her heart. To cheer him a little could not harm any one. "Come back soon," she said, again holding out her hand with a smile. "I am *so* sorry for your troubles; and if we can do anything to comfort you, come back soon again, Mr Vincent." When the poor Nonconformist came to himself after these words, he was standing outside the garden door, out of paradise, his heart throbbing, and his pulse beating in a kind of sweet delirium. In that very moment of delight he recognised, with a thrill of exaltation and anguish, the madness of his dream. No matter. What if his heart broke after? Now, at least, he could take the consolation. But if it was hard to face Mrs Pigeon before, it may well be supposed that it was not easy now, with all this world of passionate fancies throbbing in his brain, to turn away from his elevation, and encounter Salem and its irritated deacons. Vincent went slowly up Grange Lane, trying to make up his mind to his inevitable duty. When he

was nearly opposite the house of Dr Marjoribanks, he paused to look back. The garden door was again open, and somebody else was going into the enchanted house. Somebody else;—a tall slight figure, in a loose light-coloured dress, which he recognised instinctively with an agony of jealous rage. A minute before he had allowed to himself, in an exquisite despair, that to hope was madness; but the sight of his rival awoke other thoughts in the mind of the minister. With quick eyes he identified the companion of his midnight journey—he in whose name all Susan's wretchedness had been wrought—he whom Lady Western could trust "with life—to death." Vincent went back at the sight of him, and found the door now close shut, through which his steps had passed. Close shut—enclosing the other—shutting *him* out in the cold external gloom. He forgot all he had to do for himself and his friends—he forgot his duty, his family, everything in the world but hopeless love and passionate jealousy, as he turned again to Lady Western's door.

CHAPTER XXXII.

Thus while Mrs Vincent sat in Susan's sick-room, with her mind full of troubled thoughts, painfully following her son into an imaginary and unequal conflict with the wife of the rebellious deacon; and while the Salem congregation in general occupied itself with conjectures how this internal division could be healed, and what the pastor would do, the pastor himself was doing the very last thing he ought to have done in the circumstances—lingering down Grange Lane in the broad daylight with intent to pass Lady Western's door—that door from which he had himself emerged a very few minutes before. Why did he turn back and loiter again along that unprofitable way? He did not venture to ask himself the question; he only did it in an utterly unreasonable access of jealousy and rage. If he had been Lady Western's accepted lover instead of the hopeless worshipper afar off of that bright unattainable creature, he could still have had no possible

right to forbid the entrance of Mr Fordham at that garden gate. He went back with a mad, unreasoning impulse, only excusable in consideration of the excited state of mind into which so many past events had concurred to throw him. But the door opened again as he passed it. Instinctively Vincent stood still, without knowing why. It was not Mr Fordham who came out. It was a stealthy figure, which made a tremulous pause at sight of him, and, uttering a cry of dismay, fixed eyes which still gleamed, but had lost all their steadiness, upon his face. Vincent felt that he would not have recognised her anywhere but at this door. Her thin lips, which had once closed so firmly, and expressed with such distinctness the flying shades of amusement and ridicule, hung apart loosely, with a perpetual quiver of hidden emotion. Her face, always dark and colourless, yet bearing such an unmistakable tone of vigour and strength, was haggard and ghastly; her once assured and steady step furtive and trembling. She gave him an appalled look, and uttered a little cry. She shivered as she looked at him, making desperate vain efforts to recover her composure and conceal the agitation into which his sudden appearance had thrown her. But nature at last had triumphed over this woman who had defied her so long. She had not strength left to accomplish the cheat. "You!" she cried, with a shrill tone of

terror and confusion in her voice, "I did not look for you!" It was all her quivering lips would say.

The sight of her had roused Vincent. "You were going to escape," he said. "Do you forget your word? Must I tell *her* everything, or must I place you in surer custody? You have broken your word."

"My word! I did not give you my word," she cried, eagerly. "No. I—I never said—: and," after a pause, "if I had said it, how do you imagine I was going to escape? Escape! from what? That is the worst—one cannot escape," said the miserable woman, speaking as if by an uncontrollable impulse, "never more; especially if one keeps quiet in one place and has nothing to do," she continued after a pause, recovering herself by strange gleams now and then for a moment; "that is why I came out, to escape, as you say, for half an hour, Mr Vincent. Besides, I don't have news enough—not nearly enough. How do you think I can keep still when nobody sends me any news? How long is it since I saw you last? And I have heard nothing since then—not a syllable! and you expect me to sit still, because I have given my word? Besides," after another breathless pause, and another gleam of self-recovery, "the laws of honour don't extend to women. We are weak, and we are allowed to lie."

"You are speaking wildly," said Vincent, with some compassion and some horror, putting his hand on her

arm to guide her back to the house. Mrs Hilyard gave a slight convulsive start, drew away from his touch, and gazed upon him with an agony of fright and terror in her eyes.

"We agreed that I was to stay with Alice," she said. "You forget I am staying with Alice: she — she keeps me safe, you know. Ah! people change so; I am sometimes — half afraid — of Alice, Mr Vincent. My child is like her — *my* child — she did not know me!" cried the wretched woman, with a sob that came out of the depths of her heart; "after all that happened, she did not know me! To be sure, that was quite natural," she went on again, once more recovering her balance for an instant, "she *could* not know me! and I am not beautiful, like Lady Western, to please a child's eye. Beauty is good — very good. I was once pretty myself; any man would have forgiven me as you did when Alice came with her lovely face; but I daresay your mother would not have minded had it been she. Ah, that reminds me," said Mrs Hilyard, gradually acquiring a little more steadiness, "that was why I came out: to go to your mother — to ask if perhaps she had heard anything — from my child."

"This is madness," said Vincent; "you know my mother could not possibly hear about your child; you want to escape — I can see it in your eyes."

"If you will tell me what kind of things people can

escape from, I will answer you," said his strange companion, still becoming more composed. "Hush! I said what was true. The governess, you know, had your address. Is it very long since yesterday when I got that news from Dover? Never mind. I daresay I am asking wild questions that cannot have any answer. Do you remember being here with me once before? Do you remember looking through the grating and seeing——? Ah, there is Mr Fordham now with Alice! Poor young man!" said Mrs Hilyard, turning once more to look at him, still vigilant and anxious, but with a softened glance. "Poor minister! I told you not to fall in love with her lovely face. I told you she was kind, too kind—she does not mean any harm. I warned you. Who could have thought then that we should have so much to do with each other?" she resumed, shrinking from him, and trying to conceal how she shrank with another convulsive shiver; "but you were going to visit your people or something. I must not keep you, Mr Vincent; you must go away."

"Not till you have returned to the house; and given me your word of honour," said Vincent, "not to escape, or to attempt to escape; or else I must tell *her* everything, or give you up into stronger hands. I will not leave you here."

"My word! but women are not bound by their honour; *our* honour means—not our word," cried Mrs

Hilyard, wildly; "my parole, he means; soldiers, and heroes, and men of honour give their parole; you don't exact it from women. Words are not kept to us, Mr Vincent; do you expect us to keep them? Yes, yes; I know I am talking wildly. Is it strange, do you think? But what if I give you my word, and nobody sends me any further news—nothing about my child? Women are only wild animals when their children are taken from them. I will forget it, and go away for news—news! That is what I want. Escape!" she repeated, with a miserable cry; "who can escape? I do not understand what it means."

"But you must not leave this house," said Vincent, firmly. "You understand what *I* mean. You must not leave Lady Western. Go with her where she pleases; but unless you promise on your honour to remain here, and with her, I shall be obliged——"

"Hush!" she said, trembling—"hush! My *honour!*—and you still trust in it? I will promise," she continued, turning and looking anxiously round into the dull winter daylight, as if calculating what chance she had of rushing away and eluding him. Then her eyes returned to the face of the young man, who stood firm and watchful beside her—agitated, yet so much stronger, calmer, even more resolute than she; then shrinking back, and keeping her eyes, with a kind of fascinated gaze, upon his face, she repeated the words

slowly, "I promise—upon my honour. I will not go away—escape, as you call it. If I should go mad, that will not matter. Yes, ring the bell for me. You are the stronger now. I will obey you and go back. You have taken a woman's parole, Mr Vincent," she went on, with a strange spasmodic shadow of that old movement of her mouth; "it will be curious to note if she can keep it. Good-bye—good-bye." She spoke with a trembling desperation of calmness, mastering herself with all her power. She did not remove her eyes from his face till the door had been opened. "I promise, on my honour," she repeated, with again a gleam of terror, as Vincent stood watching. Then the door closed, shutting in that tragic, wretched figure. She was gone back to her prison, with her misery, from which she could not escape. In that same garden, Vincent, with the sharp eyes of love and despair, even while watching her, had caught afar off a vision of two figures together, walking slowly, one leaning on the other, with the lingering steps of happiness. The sight went to his heart with a dull pang of certainty, which crushed down in a moment the useless effervescence of his former mood. His prisoner and he parted, going in and out, one scarcely less miserable at that moment than the other. In full sight of them both lingered for the same moment these two in the tenderest blessedness of life. Vincent turned sharp round, and went

away the whole length of the long road past St Roque's, past the farthest village suburb of Carlingford, stifling his heart that it should say nothing. He had forgotten all about those duties which brought him there. Salem had vanished from his horizon. He saw nothing in heaven or earth but that miserable woman going back to her prison, interwoven with the vision of these two in their garden of paradise. The sight possessed him heart and spirit; he could not even feel that he felt it, his heart lying stifled in his bosom. It *was*, and there was no more to say.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Mrs Vincent made many pilgrimages out of the sick-room that day; her mind was disturbed and restless; she could not keep still by Susan's side. She went and strayed through her son's rooms, looked at his books, gave a furtive glance at his linen; then went back and sat down for a little, until a renewed access of anxiety sent her wandering forth once more. Then she heard him come in, and went out to see him. But he was gloomy and uncommunicative, evidently indisposed to satisfy her in any way, absorbed in his own thoughts. Mrs Vincent came and sat by him while he dined, thinking, in her simplicity, that it would be a pleasure to Arthur. But Arthur, with the unsocial habits of a man accustomed to live alone, had already set up a book before him while he ate, leaving his mother to wonder by herself behind what was the world of unknown thought that rapt her son, and into which her wistful wonder could not penetrate. But

the widow was wise in her generation : she would not worry him with questions which it was very apparent beforehand that he did not mean to answer. She admitted to herself with a pang of mingled pain, curiosity, and resignation, that Arthur was no longer a boy having no secrets from his mother. Once more the little woman looked at the unreasonable male creature shut up within itself, and decided, with a feminine mixture of pity and awe, that it must be allowed to take its own time and way of disclosing itself, and that to torture it into premature utterance would be foolish, not to say impracticable. She left him, accordingly, to himself, and went away again, returning, however, ere long, in her vague restlessness, as she had been doing all day. The early winter evening had closed in, and the lamp was lighted—the same lamp which had smoked and annoyed Mrs Vincent's nice perceptions the first evening she was in Carlingford. Vincent had thrown himself on a sofa with a book, not to read, but as a disguise under which he could indulge his own thoughts, when his mother came quietly back into the room. Mrs Vincent thought it looked dark and less cheerful than it ought. She poked the fire softly not to disturb Arthur, and made it blaze. Then she turned to the lamp, which flared huskily upon the table. "It smokes more than ever," said Mrs Vincent, half apologetically, in case Arthur should observe her

proceedings as she took off the globe. He, as was natural, put down his book and gazed at her with a certain impatient wonder, half contemptuous of that strange female development which amid all troubles could carry through, from one crisis of life to another, that miraculous trifling, and concern itself about the smoking of a lamp. As she screwed it up and down and adjusted the wick, with the smoky light flaring upon her anxious face, and magnifying the shadow of her little figure against the wall behind, her son looked on with a feeling very similar to that which had moved Mrs Vincent when she watched him eating his dinner with his book set up before him. These were points upon which the mother and son could not understand each other. But the sight disturbed his thoughts and touched his temper; he got up from the sofa and threw down his unread book.

"You women are incomprehensible," said the young man, with an irritation he could not subdue—"what does it matter about the lamp? but if the world were going to pieces you must still be intent upon such trifles—leave that to the people of the house."

"But, my dear, the people of the house don't understand it," said Mrs Vincent. "Oh Arthur, it is often the trifles that are the most important. I have had Mrs Tozer calling upon me to-day, and Mrs Tufton. I don't wonder, dear, if you find them a little tiresome;

but that is what every pastor has to expect. I daresay you have been worried to-day paying so many visits. Hush, there is some one coming up-stairs. It is Mr Tozer, Arthur. I can hear his voice."

Upon which the minister, conscious of not being prepared for Tozer's questions, gave vent to an impatient ejaculation. "Never a moment's respite! And now I shall have to give an account of myself," said the unfortunate Nonconformist. Mrs Vincent, who had just then finished her operations with the lamp, looked up reproachfully over the light at her son.

"Oh Arthur, consider how kind he has been! Your dear father would never have used such an expression —but you have my quick temper," said the widow, with a little sigh. She shook hands very cordially with the good butterman when he made his appearance. "I was just going to make tea for my son," said Mrs Vincent. "I have scarcely been able to sit with him at all since Susan took ill. Arthur, ring the bell—it is so kind of you to come; you will take a cup of tea with us while my son and you talk matters over—that is, if you don't object to my presence?" said the minister's mother with a smile. "Your dear papa always liked me to be with him, Arthur; and until he has a wife, Mr Tozer, I daresay his mother will not be much in the way when it is so kind a friend as you he has to talk over his business with. Bring tea di-

rectly, please. I fear you have forgotten what I said to you about the lamp, which burns quite nicely when you take a little pains. Arthur, will you open the window to clear the atmosphere of that smoke? and perhaps Mr Tozer will take a seat nearer the fire."

"I am obliged to you, ma'am," said the butterman, who had a cloud on his face. "Not no nearer, thank you all the same. If I hadn't thought you'd have done tea, I shouldn't have come troubling Mr Vincent, not so soon;" and Tozer turned a doubtful glance towards the minister, who stood longer at the window than he need have done. The widow's experienced eye saw that some irritation had risen between her son and his friend and patron. Tozer was suspicious, and ready to take offence—Arthur, alas! in an excited and restless mood, only too ready to give it. His mother could read in his shoulders, as he stood at the window with his back to her, that impulse to throw off the yoke and resent the inquisition to which he was subject, which, all conscious as he was of not having carried out Tozer's injunctions, seized upon the unfortunate Nonconformist. With a little tremulous rush, Mrs Vincent put herself in the breach.

"I am sure so warm a friend as Mr Tozer can never trouble any of my family at any time," said the widow, with a little effusion. "I know too well how rare a thing real kindness is—and I am very glad you have

come just now while I can be here," she added, with a sensation of thankfulness perhaps not so complimentary to Tozer as it looked on the surface. "Arthur, dear, I think that will do now. You may put up the window and come back to your chair. You don't smell the lamp, Mr Tozer? and here is the little maid with the tea."

Mrs Vincent moved about the tray almost in a bustle when the girl had placed it on the table. She rearranged all the cups and moved everything on the table, while her son took up a gloomy position behind her on the hearthrug, and Tozer preserved an aspect of ominous civility on the other side of the table. She was glad that the little maid had to return two or three times with various forgotten adjuncts, though even then Mrs Vincent's instincts of good management prompted her to point out to the handmaiden the disadvantages of her thoughtlessness. "If you had but taken time to think what would be wanted, you would have saved yourself a great deal of trouble," said the minister's mother, with a tremble of expectation thrilling her frame, looking wistfully round to see whether anything more was wanted, or if, perhaps, another minute might be gained before the storm broke. She gave Arthur a look of entreaty as she called him forward to take his place at table. She knew that real kindness was not very often to be met with in this cross-grained world; and if people are conscious of

having been kind, it is only natural they should expect gratitude! Such was the sentiment in her eyes as she turned round and fixed them upon her son. "Tea is ready, Arthur," said the widow, in a tone of secret supplication. And Arthur understood his mother, and was less and less inclined to conciliate as he came forward out of the darkness, where he might look sulky if he pleased, and sat down full in the light of the lamp, which smoked no longer. They were not a comfortable party. Mrs Vincent felt it so necessary that she should talk and keep them separated, that she lost her usual self-command, and subjects failed her in her utmost need.

"Let me give you another cup of tea," she said, as the butterman paused in the supernumerary meal which that excellent man was making; "I am so glad you happened to come this evening when I am taking a little leisure. I hope the congregation will not think me indifferent, Mr Tozer. I am sure you and Mrs Tozer will kindly explain to them how much I have been occupied. When Susan is well, I hope to make acquaintance with all my son's people. Arthur, my dear boy, you are over-tired, you don't eat anything —and you made a very poor dinner. I wish you would advise him to take a little rest, Mr Tozer. He minds his mother in most things, but not in this. It is vain for me to say anything to him about giving up

work; but perhaps a little advice from you would have more effect. I spoke to Dr Rider on the subject, and he says a little rest is all my son requires; but rest is exactly what he will never take. It was just the same with his dear father—and you are not strong enough, Arthur, to bear so much."

"I daresay as you're right, ma'am," said Tozer; "if he was to take a little more exercise and walking about—most of us Salem folks wouldn't mind a little less on Sundays, to have more of the minister at other times. I hope as there wasn't no unpleasantness, Mr Vincent, between you and Pigeon when you see him to-day?"

"I did not see him;—I mean I am sorry I was not able to call on Pigeon to-day," said Vincent, hastily; "I was unexpectedly detained," he added, growing rather red, and looking Tozer in the face. "Indeed, I am not sure that I ought to call on Pigeon," continued the minister, after a pause; "I have done nothing to offend him. If he chooses to take an affront which was never intended, I can't help it. Why should I go and court every man who is sulky or ill-tempered in the congregation? Look here, Tozer — you are a sensible man—you have been very kind, as my mother says. I set out to-day intending to go and see this man for your sake; but you know very well this is not what I came to Carlingford for. If I had known

the sort of thing that was required of me!" cried Vincent, rising up and resuming his place on the hearthrug—"to go with my hat in my hand, and beg this one and the other to forgive me, and receive me into favour:—why, what have I ever done to Pigeon? if he has anything to find fault with, he had much better come to me, and have it out."

"Mr Vincent, sir," said Tozer solemnly, pushing away his empty teacup, and leaning forward over the table on his folded arms, "them ain't the sentiments for a pastor in our connection. That's a style of thing as may do among fine folks, or in the church where there's no freedom; but them as chooses their own pastor, and pays their own pastor, and don't spare no pains to make him comfortable, has a right to expect different. Them ain't the sentiments, sir, for Salem folks. I don't say if they're wrong or right—I don't make myself a judge of no man; but I've seen a deal of our connection and human nature in general, and this I know, that a minister as has to please his flock, has got to please his flock whatever happens, and neither me nor no other man can make it different; and that Mrs Vincent, as has seen life, can tell you as well as I can. Pigeon ain't neither here nor there. It's the flock as has to be considered—and it ain't preaching alone as will do that; and that your good mother, sir, as knows the world, will tell you as well as me."

"But Arthur is well aware of it," said the alarmed mother, interposing hastily, conscious that to be thus appealed to was the greatest danger which could threaten her. "His dear father always told him so; yet, after all, Mr Vincent used to say," added the anxious diplomatist, "that nothing was to be depended on in the end but the pulpit. I have heard him talking of it with the leading people in the connection, Mr Tozer. They all used to say that, though visiting was very good, and a pastor's duty, it was the pulpit, after all, that was to be most trusted to; and I have always seen in my experience—I don't know if the same has occurred to you—that *both* gifts are very rarely to be met with. Of course, we should all strive after perfection," continued the minister's mother, with a tremulous smile—"but it is so seldom met with that any one has *both* gifts! Arthur, my dear boy, I wish you would eat something; and Mr Tozer, let me give you another cup of tea."

"No more for me, ma'am, thankye," said Tozer, laying his hand over his cup. "I don't deny as there's truth in what you say. I don't deny as a family here and there in a flock may be aggravating like them Pigeons. I'm not the man to be hard on a minister, if that ain't his turn. A pastor may have a weakness, and not feel himself as equal to one part of his work as to another; but to go for to say as visiting and

keeping the flock pleased, ain't his duty—it's that, ma'am, as goes to my heart."

Tozer's pathos touched a lighter chord in the bosom of the minister. He came back to his seat with a passing sense of amusement. "If Pigeon has anything to find fault with, let him come and have it out," said Vincent, bringing, as his mother instantly perceived, a less clouded countenance into the light of the lamp. "You, who are a much better judge than Pigeon, were not displeased on Sunday," added the minister, not without a certain complacency. Looking back upon the performances of that day, the young Nonconformist himself was not displeased. He knew now—though he was unconscious at the time—that he had made a great appearance in the pulpit of Salem, and that once more the eyes of Carlingford, unused to oratory, and still more unused to great and passionate emotion, were turned upon him.

"Well, sir, if it come to be a question of that," said the mollified deacon; "but no—it ain't that—I can't, whatever my feelings is, be forgetful of my dooty!" cried Tozer, in sudden excitement. "It ain't that, Mr Vincent; it's for your good I'm a-speaking up and letting you know my mind. It ain't the pulpit, sir. I'll not say as I ever had a word to say against your sermons: but when the minister goes out of my house, a-saying as he's going to visit the flock, and when he's

to be seen the next moment, Mrs Vincent, not going to the flock, but a-spending his precious time in Grange Lane with them as don't know nothing, and don't care nothing for Salem, nor understand the ways of folks like us——"

Here Tozer was interrupted suddenly by the minister, who once more rose from his chair with an angry exclamation. What he might have said in the hasty impulse of the moment nobody could tell; but Mrs Vincent, hastily stumbling up on her part from her chair, burst in with a tremulous voice—

"Arthur, my dear boy! did you hear Susan call me?—hark! I fancied I heard her voice. Oh, Arthur dear, go and see, I am too weak to run myself. Say I am coming directly—hark! do you think it is Susan? Oh, Arthur, go and see!"

Startled by her earnestness, though declaring he heard nothing, the young man hastened away. Mrs Vincent seized her opportunity without loss of time.

"Mr Tozer," said the widow, "I am just going to my sick child. Arthur and you will be able to talk of your business more freely when I am gone, and I hope you will be guided to give him good advice; what I am afraid of is, that he will throw it all up," continued Mrs Vincent, leaning her hand upon the table, and bending forward confidential and solemn to the startled butterman, "as so many talented young men in our

connection do nowadays. Young men are so difficult to deal with; they will not put up with things that we know must be put up with," said the minister's mother, shaking her head with a sigh. "That is how we are losing all our young preachers;—an accomplished young man has so many ways of getting on now. Oh, Mr Tozer, I rely upon you to give my son good advice—if he is aggravated, it is my terror that he will throw it all up! Good-night. You have been our kind friend, and I have such trust in you!" Saying which the widow shook hands with him earnestly and went away, leaving the worthy deacon much shaken, and with a weight of responsibility upon him. Vincent met her at the door, assuring her that Susan had not called; but with a heroism which nobody suspected—trembling with anxiety, yet conscious of having struck a master-stroke—his mother glided away to the stillness of the sick-room, where she sat questioning her own wisdom all the evening after, and wondering whether, after all, at such a crisis, she had done right to come away.

When the minister and the deacon were left alone together, instead of returning with zest to their interrupted discussion, neither of them said anything for some minutes. Once more Vincent took up his position on the hearthrug, and Tozer gazed ruefully at the empty cup which he still covered with his hand, full of

troubled thoughts. The responsibility was almost too much for Tozer. He could scarcely realise to himself what terrors lay involved in that threatened danger, or what might happen if the minister threw it all up! He held his breath at the awful thought. The widow's Parthian arrow had gone straight to the butterman's heart.

"I hope, sir, as you won't think there's anything but an anxious feelin' in the flock to do you justice as our pastor," said Tozer, with a certain solemnity, "or that we ain't sensible of our blessin's. I've said both to yourself and others, as you was a young man of great promise, and as good a preacher as I ever see in our connection, Mr Vincent, and I'll stand by what I've said; but you ain't above taking a friend's advice —not speaking with no authority," added the good butterman, in a conciliatory tone; "it's all along of the women, sir—it's them as is at the bottom of all the mischief in a flock. It ain't Pigeon, bless you, as is to blame. And even my missis, though she's not to say unreasonable as women go—none of them can abide to hear of you a-going after Lady Western—that's it, Mr Vincent. She's a lovely creature," cried Tozer, with enthusiasm; "there ain't one in Carlingford to compare with her, as I can see, and I wouldn't be the one to blame a young man as was carried away. But there couldn't no good come of it, and Salem folks

is touchy and jealous," continued the worthy deacon; "that was all as I meant to say."

Thus the conference ended amicably after a little more talk, in which Pigeon and the other malcontents were made a sacrifice of and given up by the anxious butterman, upon whom Mrs Vincent's parting words had made so deep an impression. Tozer went home thereafter to overawe his angry wife, whom Vincent's visit to Lady Western had utterly exasperated, with the dread responsibility now laid upon them. "What if he was to throw it all up!" said Tozer. That alarming possibility struck silence and dismay to the very heart of the household. Perhaps it was the dawn of a new era of affairs in Salem. The deacon's very sleep was disturbed by recollections of the promising young men who, now he came to think of it, *had* been lost to the connection, as Mrs Vincent suggested, and *had* thrown it all up. The fate of the chapel, and all the new sittings let under the ministry of the young Nonconformist, seemed to hang on Tozer's hands. He thought of the weekly crowd, and his heart stirred. Not many deacons in the connection could boast of being crowded out of their own pews Sunday after Sunday by the influx of unexpected hearers. The enlightenment of Carlingford, as well as the filling of the chapel, was at stake. Clearly, in the history of Salem, a new era had begun.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

That week passed on without much incident. To Vincent and his mother, in whose history days had, for some time past, been counting like years, it might have seemed a very grateful pause, but for the thundrous atmosphere of doubt and uncertainty which clouded over them on every side. Susan's recovery did not progress; and Dr Rider began to look as serious over her utter languor and apathy, which nothing seemed able to disturb, as he had done at her delirium. The Salem people stood aloof, as Mrs Vincent perceived, with keen feminine observation. She could not persuade herself, as she had tried to persuade Mrs Tozer, that the landlady answered inquiries at the door by way of leaving the sick-room quiet. The fact was, that except Lady Western's fine footman, the sight of whom at the minister's door was far from desirable, nobody came to make inquiries except Mrs Tufton and Phœbe Tozer, the latter of whom found no encourage-

ment in her visits. Politic on all other points, the widow could not deny herself, when circumstances put it in her power to extinguish Phœbe. Mrs Vincent would not have harmed a fly, but it gave her a certain pleasure to wound the rash female bosom which had, as she supposed, formed plans of securing her son. As for Tozer himself, his visits had almost ceased. He was scarcely to be seen even in the shop, into which sometimes the minister himself gazed disconsolately when he strayed out in the twilight to walk his cares away. The good butterman was otherwise employed. He was wrestling with Pigeon in many a close encounter, holding little committees in the back parlour. On his single arm and strength he felt it now to depend whether or not the pastor could tide it over, and be pulled through.

As for Vincent himself, he had retired from the conflict. He paid no visits; with a certain half-conscious falling back upon the one thing he could do best, he devoted himself to his sermons. At least he shut himself up to write morning after morning, and remained all day dull and undisturbed, brooding over his work. The congregation somehow got to hear of his abstraction. And to the offended mind of Salem there was something imposing in the idea of the minister, misunderstood and unappreciated, thus retiring from the field, and devoting himself to "study." Even Mrs

Pigeon owned to herself a certain respect for the foe who did not humble himself, but withdrew with dignity into the intrenchments of his own position. It was fine; but it was not the thing for Salem. Mrs Brown had a tea-party on the Thursday, to which the pastor was not even invited, but where there were great and manifold discussions about him, and where the Tozers found themselves an angry minority, suspected on all sides. "A pastor as makes himself agreeable here and there, but don't take no thought for the good of the flock in general, ain't a man to get on in our connection," said Mrs Pigeon, with a toss of her head at Phœbe, who blushed over all her pink arms and shoulders with mingled gratification and discomposure. Mrs Tozer herself received this insinuation without any violent disclaimer. "For my part, I can't say as the minister hasn't made himself very agreeable as far as we are concerned," said that judicious woman. "It's well known as friends can't come amiss to Tozer and me. Dinner or supper, we never can be took wrong, not being fine folks but comfortable," said the butterman's wife, directing her eyes visibly to Mrs Pigeon, who was not understood to be liberal in her housekeeping. Poor Phœbe was not so discriminating. When she retired into a corner with her companions, Phœbe's injured feelings disclosed themselves. "I am sure he never said anything to me that he might not have said

to any one," she confessed to Maria Pigeon; "it is very hard to have people look so at me when perhaps he means nothing at all," said Phœbe, half dejected, half important. Mrs Pigeon heard the unguarded confession, and made use of it promptly, not careful for her consistency.

"I said when you had all set your hearts on a young man, that it was a foolish thing to do," said poor Vincent's skilful opponent; "I said he'd be sure to come a-dangling about our houses, and a-trifling with the affections of our girls. It'll be well if it doesn't come too true; not as I want to pretend to be wiser nor other folks—but I said so, as you'll remember, Mrs Brown, the very first day Mr Vincent preached in Salem. I said, 'He's not bad-looking, and he's young and has genteel ways, and the girls don't know no better. You mark my words, if he don't make some mischief in Carlingford afore all's done,'—and I only hope as it won't come too true."

"Them as is used to giddy girls gets timid, as is natural," said Mrs Tozer; "it's different where there is only one, and she a quiet one. I can't say as I ever thought a young man was more taking for being a minister; but there can't be no doubt as it must be harder upon you, ma'am, as has four daughters, than me as has only one—and she a quiet one," added the deacon's wife, with a glance of maternal pride at

Phœbe, who was just then enfolding the spare form of Maria Pigeon in an artless embrace, and who looked in her pink wreath and white muslin dress, "quite the lady," at least in her mother's eyes.

"The quiet ones is the deep ones," said Tozer, interfering, as a wise man ought, in the female duel, as it began to get intense. "Phœbe's my girl, and I don't deny being fond of her, as is natural; but she ain't so innocent as not to know how things is working, and what meaning is in some folks' minds. But that's neither here nor there, and it's time as we was going away."

"Not before we've had prayers," said Mrs Brown. "I *was* surprised the first time I see Mr Vincent in your house, Mr Tozer, as we all parted like heathens without a blessing, specially being all chapel folks, and of one way of thinking. Our ways is different in this house; and though we're in a comfortless kind of condition, and no better than if we hadn't no minister, still as there's you and Mr Pigeon here——"

The tea-party thus concluded with a still more distinct sense of the pastor's shortcomings. There was nobody to "give prayers" but Pigeon and Tozer. For all social purposes, the flock in Salem might as well have had no minister. The next little committee held in the back parlour at the butter-shop was still more unsatisfactory. While it was in progress, Mr Vincent

himself appeared, and had to be taken solemnly upstairs to the drawing-room, where there was no fire, and where the hum of the voices below was very audible, as Mrs Tozer and Phœbe, getting blue with cold, sat vainly trying to occupy the attention of the pastor.

"Pa has some business people with him in the parlour," explained Phœbe, who was very tender and sympathetic, as might be expected; but it did not require a very brilliant intelligence to divine that the business under discussion was the minister, even if Mrs Tozer's solemnity, and the anxious care with which he was conveyed past the closed door of the parlour, had not already filled the mind of the pastor with suspicion.

"Go down and let your pa know as Mr Vincent's here," said Mrs Tozer, after this uncomfortable *séance* had lasted half an hour; "and he's not to keep them men no longer than he can help; and presently we'll have a bit of supper—that's what I enjoy, that is, Mr Vincent; no ceremony like there must be at a party, but just to take us as we are; and we can't be took amiss, Tozer and me. There's always a bit of something comfortable for supper; and no friend as could be made so welcome as the minister," added the good woman, growing more and more civil as she came to her wits' end; for had not Pigeon and Brown been asked to share that something comfortable? For the

first time it was a relief to the butterman's household when the pastor declined the impromptu invitation, and went resolutely away. His ears, sharpened by suspicion, recognised the familiar voices in the parlour, where the door was ajar when he went out again. Vincent could not have imagined that to feel himself unwelcome at Tozer's would have had any effect whatever upon his preoccupied mind, or that to pass almost within hearing of one of the discussions which must inevitably be going on about him among the managers of Salem, could quicken his pulse or disturb his composure. But it was so notwithstanding. He had come out at the entreaty of his mother, half unwillingly, anticipating, with the liveliest realisation of all its attendant circumstances, an evening spent at that big table in the back parlour, and something comfortable to supper. He came back again tingling with curiosity, indignation, and suppressed defiance. The something comfortable had not this time been prepared for him. He was being discussed, not entertained, in the parlour; and Mrs Tozer and Phœbe, in the chill fine drawing-room up-stairs, where the gas was blazing in a vain attempt to make up for the want of the fire—shivering with cold and civility—had been as much disconcerted by his appearance as if they too were plotting against him. Mr Vincent returned to his sermon not without some additional fire. He had spent a great deal of

time over his sermon that week; it was rather learned and very elaborate, and a little—dull. The poor minister felt very conscious of the fact, but could not help it. He was tempted to put it in the fire, and begin again, when he returned that Friday evening, smarting with those little stinging arrows of slight and injury; but it was too late: and this was the beginning of the "coorse" which Tozer had laid so much store by. Vincent concluded the elaborate production by a few sharp sentences, which he was perfectly well aware did not redeem it, and explained to his mother, with a little ill-temper, as she thought, that he had changed his mind about visiting the Tozers that night. Mrs Vincent did Arthur injustice as she returned to Susan's room, where again matters looked very sadly; and so the troubled week came to a close.

CHAPTER XXXV.

SUNDAY! It came again, the inevitable morning. There are pathetic stories current in the world about most of the other professions that claim the ear of the public; how lawyers prepare great speeches, which are to open for them the gates of the future, in the midst of the killing anxieties of life and poverty—how mimes and players of all descriptions keep the world in laughter while their hearts are breaking. But few people think of the sufferings of the priest, whom, let trouble or anxiety come as they please, necessity will have in the inexorable pulpit Sunday after Sunday. So Vincent thought as he put on his Geneva gown in his little vestry, with the raw February air coming in at the open window, and his sermon, which was dull, lying on the table beside him. It *was* dull—he knew it in his heart; but after all the strain of passion he had been held at, what was to preserve him any more than another from the unavoidable lassitude and blank

that followed? Still it was not agreeable to know that Salem was crowded to the door, and that this sermon, upon which the minister looked ruefully, was laboured and feeble, without any divine spark to enlighten it, or power to touch the hearts of other men. The consciousness that it was dull would, the preacher knew, make it duller still—its heaviness would affect himself as well as his audience. Still that was not to be helped now; there it lay, ready for utterance; and here in his Geneva gown, with the sound in his ears of all the stream of entering worshippers who were then arranging themselves in the pews of Salem, stood the minister prepared to speak. There was, as Vincent divined, a great crowd—so great a crowd that various groups stood during the whole service, which, by dint of being more laboured and feeble than usual, was longer too. With a certain dulness of feeling, half despairing, the minister accomplished the preliminary devotions, and was just opening his Bible to begin the work of the day when his startled eye caught a most unlooked-for accession to the flock. Immediately before him, in the same pew with Mrs Tozer and Phœbe, what was that beautiful vision that struck him dumb for the moment? Tozer himself had brought her in during the prayers, through the groups that occupied the passage, to his own seat, where she sat expanding her rustling

plumage, and looking round with all her natural sweetness, and a kind of delightful unconscious patronage and curiosity, upon the crowd of unknown people who were nobody in Carlingford. The sight of her struck the young Nonconformist dumb. He took some moments to recover himself, ere, with a pang in his heart, he began his dull sermon. It mattered nothing to Lady Western what kind of a sermon he preached. She was not clever, and probably would never know the difference; but it went to the young man's heart, an additional pang of humiliation, to think that it was not his best he had to set before that unexpected hearer. What had brought the beauty here? Vincent's dazzled eyes did not make out for some time the dark spare figure beside her, all sunned over with the rays of her splendour. Mrs Tozer and Phœbe on one side, proud yet half affronted, contemplating with awe and keen observation the various particulars of Lady Western's dress, were not more unlike her, reposing in her soft beauty within the hard wooden enclosure of the pew, beaming upon everybody in sweet ease and composure—than was the agitated restless face, with gleaming uncertain eyes that flashed everywhere, which appeared at her other side when Vincent came to be able to see. He preached his sermon with a certain self-disgust growing more and more intense every time he ven-

tured to glance at that strange line of faces. The only attentive hearer in Tozer's pew was Lady Western, who looked up at the young minister steadily with her sweet eyes, and listened with all the gracious propriety that belonged to her. The Tozers, for their part, drawn up in their end of the seat, gave a very divided attention, being chiefly occupied with Lady Western; and as for Mrs Hilyard, the sight of her restlessness and nervous agitation would have been pitiful had anybody there been sufficiently interested to observe it. Mr Vincent's sermon certainly did not secure that wandering mind. All her composure had deserted this strange woman. Now and then she almost rose up by way apparently of relieving the restless fever that possessed her; her nervous hands wandered among the books of the Tozer pew with an incessant motion. Her eyes gleamed in all directions with a wistful anxiety and suspicion. All this went on while Vincent preached his sermon; he had no eyes for the other people in the place. Now and then the young man became rhetorical, and threw in here and there a wild flourish to break the deadness of his discourse, with no success as he saw. He read tedium in all the lines of faces before him as he came to a close with a dull despair—in all the faces except that sweet face never disturbed out of its lovely calm of attention, which would have listened to the Dissenting minister

quite as calmly had he preached like Paul. With a sensation that this was one of the critical moments of his fate, and that he had failed in it, Vincent dropped into his seat in exhaustion and self-disgust, while his hearers got up to sing their hymn. It was at this moment that Tozer walked up through the aisle, steadily, yet with his heart beating louder than usual, and ascended the pulpit-stairs to give forth that intimation which had been agreed upon in the back parlour on Friday. The minister was disturbed in his uncomfortable repose by the entrance of the deacon into the pulpit, where the worthy butterman seated himself by Vincent's side. The unconscious congregation sang its hymn, while the Nonconformist, rousing up, looked with surprised eyes upon his unexpected companion; yet there were bosoms in the flock which owned a thrill of emotion as Tozer's substantial person partially disappeared from view behind the crimson cushion. Phœbe left off singing, and subsided into tears and her seat. Mrs Pigeon lifted up her voice and expanded her person; meanwhile Tozer whispered ominously, with a certain agitation, in his pastor's ear—

"It's three words of an intimation as I'd like to give—nothing of no importance; a meeting of the flock as some of us would like to call, if it's quite agreeable—nothing as you need mind, Mr Vincent.

We wouldn't go for to occupy your time, sir, attending of it. There wasn't no opportunity to tell you before. I'll give it out, if it's agreeable," said Tozer, with hesitation—"or if you'd rather——"

"Give it to me," said the minister quickly. He took the paper out of the butterman's hand, who drew back uncomfortable and embarrassed, wishing himself anywhere in the world but in the pulpit, from which that revolutionary document menaced the startled pastor with summary deposition. It was a sufficiently simple notice of a meeting to be held on the following Monday evening, in the schoolroom, which was the scene of all the tea and other meetings of Salem. This, however, was no tea-meeting. Vincent drew his breath hard, and changed colour, as he bent down under the shadow of the pulpit-cushion and the big Bible, and read this dangerous document. Meanwhile the flock sang their hymn, to which Tozer, much discomposed, added a few broken notes of tremulous bass as he sat by the minister's side. When Mr Vincent again raised his head, and sat erect with the notice in his hand, the troubled deacon made vain attempts to catch his eye, and ask what was to be done. The Nonconformist made no reply to these telegraphic communications. When the singing was ended he rose, still with the paper in his hand, and faced the congregation, where he no longer saw one

face with a vague background of innumerable other faces, but had suddenly woke up to behold his battle-ground and field of warfare, in which everything dear to him was suddenly assailed. Unawares the assembled people, who had received no special sensation from the sermon, woke up also at the sight of Vincent's face. He read the notice to them with a voice that tingled through the place; then he paused. "This meeting is one of which I have not been informed," said Vincent. "It is one which I am not asked to attend. I invite you to it, all who are here present; and I invite you thereafter," continued the minister, with an unconscious elevation of his head, "to meet me on the following evening to hear what I have to say to you. Probably the business will be much the same on both occasions, but it will be approached from different sides of the question. I invite you to meet on Monday, according to this notice; and I invite you on Tuesday, at the same place and hour, to meet me."

Vincent did not hear the audible hum and buzz of surprise and excitement which ran through his startled flock. He did not pay much attention to what Tozer said to him when all was over. He lingered in his vestry, taking off his gown, until he could hear Lady Western's carriage drive off after an interval of lingering. The young Dowager had gone out slowly, think-

ing to see him, and comfort him with a compliment about his sermon, concerning the quality of which she was not critical. She was sorry in her kind heart to perceive his troubled looks, and to discover that somehow, she could not quite understand how, something annoying and unexpected had occurred to him. And then this uneasy companion, to whom he had bound her, and whose strange agitation and wonderful change of aspect Lady Western could in no way account for —But the carriage rolled away at last, not without reluctance, while the minister still remained in his vestry. Then he hurried home, speaking to no one. Mrs Vincent did not understand her son all day, nor even next morning, when he might have been supposed to have time to calm down. He was very silent, but no longer dreamy or languid, or lost in the vague discontent and dejection with which she was familiar. On the contrary, the minister had woke up out of that abstraction. He was wonderfully alert, open-eyed, full of occupation. When he sat down to his writing-table it was not to muse, with his pen in his languid fingers, now and then putting down a sentence, but to write straight forward with evident fire and emphasis. He was very tender to herself, but he did not tell her anything. Some new cloud had doubtless appeared on the firmament where there was little need for any further clouds. The widow rose on the Monday morn-

ing with a presentiment of calamity on her mind—rose from the bed in Susan's room which she occupied for two or three hours in the night, sometimes snatching a momentary sleep, which Susan's smallest movement interrupted. Her heart was rent in two between her children. She went from Susan's bedside, where her daughter lay in dumb apathy, not to be roused by anything that could be said or done, to minister wistfully at Arthur's breakfast, which, with her heart in her throat, the widow made a pitiful pretence of sharing. She could not ask him questions. She was silent, too, in her great love and sorrow. Seeing some new trouble approaching—wistfully gazing into the blank skies before her, to discover, if that were possible, without annoying Arthur, or compromising him, what it was; but rather than compromise or annoy him, contenting herself not to know—the greatest stretch of endurance to which as yet she had constrained her spirit.

Arthur did not go out all that Monday. Even in the house a certain excitement was visible to Mrs Vincent's keen observation. The landlady herself made her appearance in tears to clear away the remains of the minister's dinner. "I hope, sir, as you don't think what's past and gone has made no difference on me," said that tearful woman in Mrs Vincent's hearing; "it ain't me as would ever give my support to such

doings." When the widow asked, "What doings?" Arthur only smiled and made some half articulate remark about gossip, which his mother of course treated at its true value. As the dark wintry afternoon closed in, Mrs Vincent's anxiety increased under the influence of the landlady's Sunday dress, in which she was visible progressing about the passages, and warning her husband to mind he wasn't late. At last Mrs Tufton called, and the minister's mother came to a true understanding of the state of affairs. Mrs Tufton was unsettled and nervous, filled with a not unexhilarating excitement, and all the heat of partisanship. "Don't you take on," said the good little woman; "Mr Tufton is going to the meeting to tell them his sentiments about his young brother. My dear, they will never go against what Mr Tufton says: and if I should mount upon the platform and make a speech myself, there shan't be anything done that could vex you; for we always said he was a precious young man, and a credit to the connection; and it would be a disgrace to us all to let the Pigeons, or such people, have it all their own way." Mrs Vincent managed to ascertain all the particulars from the old minister's wife. When she was gone, the widow sat down a little with a very desolate heart to think it all over. Arthur, with a new light in his eye, and determination in his face, was writing in the sitting-room; but Arthur's

mother could not sit still as he did, and imagine the scene in the Salem schoolroom, and how everybody discussed and sat upon her boy, and decided all the momentous future of his young life in this private inquisition. She went back, however, beside him, and poured out a cup of tea for him, and managed to swallow one for herself, talking about Susan and indifferent household matters, while the evening wore on and the hour of the meeting approached. A little before that hour Mrs Vincent left Arthur, with an injunction not to come into the sick-room that evening until she sent for him, as she thought Susan would sleep. As she left the room the landlady went downstairs, gorgeous in her best bonnet and shawl, with all the personal satisfaction which a member of a flock naturally feels when called to a bed of justice to decide the future destiny of its head. The minister's fate was in the hands of his people; and it was with a pleasurable sensation that, from every house throughout Grove Street and the adjacent regions, the good people were going forth to decide it. As for the minister's mother, she went softly back to Susan's room, where the nurse, who was Mrs Vincent's assistant, had taken her place. "She looks just the same," said the poor mother. "Just the same," echoed the attendant. "I don't think myself as there'll be no change until——" Mrs Vincent turned away silently

in her anguish, which she dared not indulge. She wrapped herself in a black shawl, and took out the thick veil of crape which she had worn in her first mourning. Nobody could recognise her under that screen. But it was with a pang that she tied that sign of woe over her pale face. The touch of the crape made her shiver. Perhaps she was but forestalling the mourning which, in her age and weakness, she might have to renew again. With such thoughts she went softly through the wintry lighted streets towards Salem. As she approached the door, groups of people going the same way brushed past her through Grove Street. Lively people, talking with animation, pleased with this new excitement, declaring, sometimes so loudly that she could hear them as they passed, what side they were on, and that they, for their part, were going to vote for the minister to give him another trial. The little figure in those black robes, with anxious looks shrouded under the crape veil, went on among the rest to the Salem schoolroom. She took her seat close to the door, and saw Tozer and Pigeon, and the rest of the deacons, getting upon the platform, where on occasions more festive the chairman and the leading people had tea. The widow looked through her veil at the butterman and the poulterer with one keen pang of resentment, of which she repented instantly. She did not despise them as

another might have done. They were the constituted authorities of the place, and her son's fate, his reputation, his young life, all that he had or could hope for in the world, was in their hands. The decision of the highest authorities in the land was not so important to Arthur as that of the poulterer and the butterman. There they stood, ready to open their session, their inquisition, their solemn tribunal. The widow drew her veil close, and clasped her hands together to sustain herself. It was Pigeon who was about to speak.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

Mr Pigeon was a heavy orator; he was a tall man, badly put together, with a hollow crease across his waistcoat, which looked very much as if he might be folded in two, and so laid away out of mischief. His arms moved foolishly about in the agonies of oratory, as if they did not belong to him; but he did not look absurd through Mrs Vincent's crape veil, as she sat gazing at the platform on which he stood, and taking in with eager ears every syllable that came from his lips. Mr Pigeon said it was Mr Vincent as they had come there to discuss that night. The managers had made up their minds as it was a dooty to lay things before the flock. Mr Vincent was but a young man, and most in that congregation was ready to make allowances; and as for misfortunes as might have happened to him, he wasn't a-going to lay that to the pastor's charge, nor take no mean advantages. He was for judging a man on his merits, he was. If they

was to take Mr Vincent on his merits without no prejudice, they would find as he hadn't carried out the expectations as was formed of him. Not as there was anything to be said against his preaching; his preaching was well enough, though it wasn't to call rousing up, which was what most folks wanted. There wasn't no desire on the part of the managers to object to his preaching: he had ought to have preached well, that was the truth, for every one as had been connected with Salem in Mr Tufton's time knew as there was a deal of difference between the new pastor and the old pastor, as far as the work of a congregation went. As for Pigeon's own feelings, he would have held his peace cheerful, if his dooty had permitted him, or if he had seen as it was for the good of the connection. But things was come to that pass in Salem as a man hadn't ought to mind his own feelings, but had to do his dooty, if he was to be took to the stake for it. And them were his circumstances, as many a one as he had spoken to in private could say, if they was to speak up.

To all this Mrs Vincent listened with the profoundest attention behind her veil. The schoolroom was very full of people—almost as full as on the last memorable tea-party; but the square lines of the gas-burners, coming down with two flaring lights each from the low roof, were veiled with no festoons this

time, and threw an unmitigated glare upon the people, all in their dark winter-dresses, without any attempt at special embellishment. Mrs Pigeon was in the foreground, on a side-bench near the platform, very visible to the minister's mother, nodding her head and giving triumphant glances around now and then to point her husband's confused sentences. Mrs Pigeon had her daughters spread out on one side of her, all in their best bonnets, and at the corner of the same seat sat little Mrs Tufton, who shook her charitable head when the poulterer's wife nodded hers, and put her handkerchief to her eyes now and then, as she gazed up at the platform, not without a certain womanly misgiving as to how her husband was going to conduct himself. The Tozers had taken up their position opposite. Mrs Tozer and her daughter had all the appearance of being in great spirits, especially Phœbe, who seemed scarcely able to contain her amusement as Mr Pigeon went on. All this Mrs Vincent saw as clearly as in a picture through the dark folds of her veil. She sat back as far as she could into the shade, and pressed her hands close together, and was noways amused, but listened with as profound an ache of anxiety in her heart as if Pigeon had been the Lord Chancellor. As for the audience in general, it showed some signs of weariness as the poulterer stumbled on through his confused speech; and not a restless gesture, not a

suppressed yawn in the place, but was apparent to the minister's mother. The heart in her troubled bosom beat steadier as she gazed; certainly no violent sentiment actuated the good people of Salem as they sat staring with calm eyes at the speaker. Mrs Vincent knew how a congregation looked when it was thoroughly excited and up in arms against its head. She drew a long breath of relief, and suffered the tight clasp of her hands to relax a little. There was surely no popular passion there.

And then Mr Tufton got up, swaying heavily with his large uncertain old figure over the table. The old minister sawed the air with his white fat hand after he had said "My beloved brethren" twice over; and little Mrs Tufton, sitting below in her impatience and anxiety lest he should not acquit himself well, dropt her handkerchief and disappeared after it, while Mrs Vincent erected herself under the shadow of her veil. Mr Tufton did his young brother no good. He was so sympathetic over the misfortunes that had befallen Vincent's family, that bitter tears came to the widow's eyes, and her hands once more tightened in a silent strain of self-support. While the old minister impressed upon his audience the duty of bearing with his dear young brother, and being indulgent to the faults of his youth, it was all the poor mother could do to keep silent, to stifle down the indignant sob in her

heart, and keep steady in her seat. Perhaps it was some breath of anguish escaping from her unawares that drew towards her the restless gleaming eyes of another strange spectator there. That restless ghost of a woman!—all shrunken, gleaming, ghastly—her eyes looking all about in an obliquity of furtive glances, fearing yet daring everything. When she found Mrs Vincent out, she fixed her suspicious desperate gaze upon the crape veil which hid the widow's face. The deacons of Salem were to Mrs Hilyard but so many wretched masquers playing a rude game among the dreadful wastes of life, of which these poor fools were ignorant. Sometimes she watched them with a reflection of her old amusement—oftener, pursued by her own tyrannical fancy and the wild restlessness which had brought her here, forgot altogether where she was. But Mrs Vincent's sigh, which breathed unutterable things—the steady fixed composure of that little figure while the old minister maundered on with his condolences, his regrets, his self-glorification over the interest he had taken in his dear young brother, and the advice he had given him—could not miss the universal scrutiny of this strange woman's eyes. She divined, with a sudden awakening of the keen intelligence which was half crazed by this time, yet vivid as ever, the state of mind in which the widow was. With a half-audible cry the Back Grove Street needlewoman

gazed at the minister's mother; in poignant trouble, anxiety, indignant distress—clasping her tender hands together yet again to control the impatience, the resentment, the aching mortification and injury with which she heard all this maudlin pity overflowing the name of her boy—yet, ah! what a world apart from the guilty and desperate spirit which sat there gazing like Dives at Lazarus. Mrs Hilyard slid out of her seat with a rapid stealthy movement, and placed herself unseen by the widow's side. The miserable woman put forth her furtive hand and took hold of the black gown—the old black silk gown, so well worn and long preserved. Mrs Vincent started a little, looked at her, gave her a slight half-spasmodic nod of recognition, and returned to her own absorbing interest. The interruption made her raise her head a little higher under the veil, that not even this stranger might imagine Arthur's mother to be affected by what was going on. For everything else, Mrs Hilyard had disappeared out of the widow's memory. She was thinking only of her son.

As for the other minister's wife, poor Mrs Tufton's handkerchief dropped a great many times during her husband's speech. Oh, if these blundering men, who mismanage matters so, could but be made to hold their peace! Tears of vexation and distress came into the eyes of the good little woman. Mr Tufton meant to

do exactly what was right; she knew he did; but to sit still and hear him making such a muddle of it all! Such penalties have to be borne by dutiful wives. She had to smile feebly, when he concluded, to somebody who turned round to congratulate her upon the minister's beautiful speech. The beautiful speech had done poor Vincent a great deal more harm than Pigeon's oration. Salem folks, being appealed to on this side, found out that they had, after all, made great allowances for their minister, and that he had not on his part shown a due sense of their indulgence. Somebody else immediately after went on in the same strain: a little commotion began to rise in the quiet meeting. "Mr Tufton's 'it it," said a malcontent near Mrs Vincent; "we've been a deal too generous, that's what we've been; and he's turned on us." "He was always too high for *my* fancy," said another. "It ain't the thing for a pastor to be high-minded; and them lectures and things was never nothing but vanity; and so I always said." Mrs Vincent smiled a wan smile to herself under her veil. She refused to let the long breath escape from her breast in the form of a sigh. She sat fast, upright, holding her hands clasped. Things were going against Arthur. Unseen among all his foes, with an answer, and more than an answer, to everything they said, burning in dumb restrained eloquence in her breast, his mother held up his banner.

One at least was there who knew Arthur, and lifted up a dumb protest on his behalf to earth and heaven. She felt with an uneasy half-consciousness that some haunting shadow was by her side, and was even vaguely aware of the hold upon her dress, but had no leisure in her mind for anything but the progress of this contest, and the gradual overthrow, accomplishing before her eyes, of Arthur's cause.

It was at this moment that Tozer rose up to make that famous speech which has immortalised him in the connection, and for which the Homerton students, in their enthusiasm, voted a piece of plate to the worthy butterman. The face of the Salem firmament was cloudy when Tozer rose; suggestions of discontent were surging among the audience. Heads of families were stretching over the benches to confide to each other how long it was since they had seen the minister; how he never had visited as he ought; and how desirable "a change" might prove. Spiteful glances of triumph sought poor Phœbe and her mother upon their bench, where the two began to fail in their courage, and laughed no longer. A crisis was approaching. Mrs Tufton picked up her handkerchief, and sat erect, with a frightened face; she, too, knew the symptoms of the coming storm.

Such were the circumstances under which Tozer rose in the pastor's defence.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Tozer,—"and Mr Chairman, as I ought to have said first, if this meeting had been constituted like most other meetings have been in Salem; but, my friends, we haven't met not in what I would call an honest and straightforward way, and consequently we ain't in order, not as a free assembly should be, as has met to know its own mind, and not to be dictated to by nobody. There are them as are ready to dictate in every body of men. I don't name no names; I don't make no suggestions; what I'm a-stating of is a general truth as is well known to every one as has studied philosophy. I don't come here pretending as I'm a learned man, nor one as knows better nor my neighbours. I'm a plain man, as likes everything fair and above-board, and is content when I'm well off. What I've got to say to you, ladies and gentlemen, ain't no grumbling nor reflecting upon them as is absent and can't defend themselves. I've got two things to say—first, as I think you haven't been called together not in an open way; and, second, that I think us Salem folks, as ought to know better, is a-quarrelling with our bread-and-butter, and don't know when we're well off!

"Yes, ladies and gentlemen! them's my sentiments! *we don't know when we're well off!* and if we don't mind, we'll find out how matters really is when we've been and disgusted the pastor, and drove him to throw

it all up. Such a thing ain't uncommon; many and many's the one in our connection as has come out for the ministry, meaning nothing but to stick to it, and has been drove by them as is to be found in every flock—them as is always ready to dictate—to throw it all up. My friends, the pastor as is the subject of this meeting"—here Tozer sank his voice and lookedround with a certain solemnity—"Mr Vincent, ladies and gentlemen, as has doubled the seat-holders in Salem in six months' work, and, I make bold to say, brought one-half of you as is here to be regular at chapel, and take an interest in the connection—Mr Vincent, I say, as you're all collected here to knock down in the dark, if so be as you are willing to be dictated to—the same, ladies and gentlemen, as we're a-discussing of to-night—told us all, it ain't so very long ago, in the crowdedest meeting as I ever see, in the biggest public hall in Carlingford—as we weren't keeping up to the standard of the old Nonconformists, nor showing, as we ought, what a voluntary church could do. It ain't pleasant to hear of, for us as thinks a deal of ourselves; but that is what the pastor said, and there was not a man as could contradict it. Now, I ask you, ladies and gentlemen, what is the reason? It's all along of this as we're doing to-night. We've got a precious young man, as Mr Tufton tells you, and a clever young man, as nobody tries for to deny; and there ain't a single blessed

reason on this earth why he shouldn't go on as he's been a-doing, till, Salem bein' crowded out to the doors (as it's been two Sundays back), we'd have had to build a new chapel, and took a place in our connection as we've never yet took in Carlingford!"

Mr Tozer paused to wipe his heated forehead, and ease his excited bosom with a long breath; his audience paused with him, taking breath with the orator in a slight universal rustle, which is the most genuine applause. The worthy butterman resumed in a lowered and emphatic tone.

"But it ain't to be," said Tozer, looking round him with a tragic frown, and shaking his head slowly. "Them as is always a-finding fault, and always a-setting up to dictate, has set their faces again' all that. It's the way of some folks in our connection, ladies and gentlemen; a minister ain't to be allowed to go on building up a chapel, and making hisself useful in the world. He ain't to be left alone to do his dooty as his best friends approve. He's to be took down out of his pulpit, and took to pieces behind his back, and made a talk and a scandal of to the whole connection! It's not his preaching as he's judged by, nor his dooty to the sick and dyin', nor any of them things as he was called to be pastor for; but it's if he's seen going to one house more nor another, or if he calls often enough on this one or t'other, and goes to all the tea-drinkings. My

opinion is," said Tozer, suddenly breaking off into jocularity, "as a young man as may-be isn't a marrying man, and anyhow can't marry more nor one, ain't in the safest place at Salem tea-drinkings; but that's neither here nor there. If the ladies haven't no pity, us men can't do nothing in that matter; but what I say is this," continued the butterman, once more becoming solemn; "to go for to judge the pastor of a flock, not by the dooty he does to his flock, but by the times he calls at one house or another, and the way he makes hisself agreeable at one place or another, ain't a thing to be done by them as prides themselves on being Christians and Dissenters. It's not like Christians—and if it's like Dissenters the more's the pity. It's mean, that's what it is," cried Tozer, with fine scorn: "it's like a parcel of old women, if the ladies won't mind me saying so. It's beneath us as has liberty of conscience to fight for, and has to set an example before the Church folks as don't know no better. But it's what is done in our connection," added the good deacon with pathos, shaking his forefinger mournfully at the crowd. "When there's a young man as is clever and talented, and fills a chapel, and gives the connection a chance of standing up in the world as it ought, here's some one as jumps up and says, 'The pastor don't come to see me,' says he—'the pastor don't do his duty—he ain't the man for Salem.' And them as

is always in every flock ready to do a mischief, takes it up; and there's talk of a change, and meetings is called, and—here we are! Yes, ladies and gentlemen, here we are! We've called a meeting, all in the dark, and give him no chance of defending himself; and them as is at the head of this movement is calling upon us to dismiss Mr Vincent. But let me tell you," continued Tozer, lowering his voice with a dramatic intuition, and shaking his forefinger still more emphatically in the face of the startled audience, "that this ain't no question of dismissing Mr Vincent; it's a matter of disgusting Mr Vincent, that's what it is—it's a matter of turning another promising young man away from the connection, and driving him to throw it all up. You mark what I say. It's what we're doing most places, us Dissenters; them as is talented and promisin', and can get a better living working for the world than working for the chapel, and won't give in to be worried about calling here and calling there—we're a-driving of them out of the connection, that's what we're doing! I could reckon up as many as six or seven as has been drove off already; and I ask you, ladies and gentlemen, what's the good of subscribing and keeping up of colleges and so forth, if that's how you're a-going to serve every clever young man as trusts hisself to be your pastor? I'm a man as don't feel no shame to say that the minister, being took up with his

family affairs and his studies, has been for weeks as he hasn't crossed my door; but am I that poor-spirited as I would drive away a young man as is one of the best preachers in the connection, because he don't come, not every day, to see me? No, my friends! them as would ever suspect such a thing of me don't know who they're a-dealing with; and I tell you, ladies and gentlemen, as this is a question as must come home to every one of your bosoms. Them as is so set upon their own way that they can't hear reason —or them as is led away by folks as like to dictate— may give their voice again' the minister, if so be as they think fit; but as for me, and them as stands by me, I ain't a-going to give in to no such tyranny! It shall never be said in our connection as a clever young man was drove away from Carlingford, and I had part in it. There's the credit o' the denomination to keep up among the Church folks—and there's the chapel to fill, as never had half the sittings let before—and there's Mr Vincent, as is the cleverest young man I ever see in our pulpit, to be kep' in the connection; and there ain't no man living as shall dictate to me or them as stands by me! Them as is content to lose the best preaching within a hundred miles, because the minister don't call on two or three families in Salem, not as often as they would like to see him," said Tozer, with trenchant sarcasm, "can put down their names again'

Mr Vincent; but for me, and them as stands by me, we ain't a-going to give in to no such dictation: we ain't a-going to set up ourselves against the spread of the Gospel, and the credit o' the connection, and toleration and freedom of conscience, as we're bound to fight for! If the pastor don't make hisself agreeable, I can put up with that—I can; but I ain't a-going to see a clever young man drove away from Salem, and the sittings vacant, and the chapel falling to ruin, and the Church folks a-laughing and a-jeering at us, not for all the deacons in the connection, nor any man in Carlingford. And this I say for myself and for all as stands by me!"

The last sentence was lost in thunders of applause. The "Salem folks" stamped with their feet, knocked the floor with their umbrellas, clapped their hands in a *furore* of enthusiasm and sympathy. Their pride was appealed to; nobody could bear the imputation of being numbered among the two or three to whom the minister had not paid sufficient attention. All the adherents of the Pigeon party deserted that luckless family sitting prominent upon their bench, with old Mrs Tufton at the corner joining as heartily as her overshoes would permit in the general commotion. There they sat, a pale line of faces, separated, by their looks of dismay and irresponsive silence, from the applauding crowd, cruelly identified as "them as is always ready

to dictate." The occasion was indeed a grand one, had the leader of the opposition been equal to it; but Mrs Pigeon only sat and stared at the new turn of affairs with a hysterical smile of spite and disappointment fixed on her face. Before the cheers died away, a young man—one of the Young Men's Christian Association connected with Salem—jumped up on a bench in the midst of the assembly, and clinched the speech of Tozer. He told the admiring meeting that he had been brought up in the connection, but had strayed away into carelessness and neglect—and when he went anywhere at all on Sundays, went to church like one of the common multitude, till Mr Vincent's lectures on Church and State opened his eyes, and brought him to better knowledge. Then came another, and another. Mrs Vincent, sitting on the back seat with her veil over her face, did not hear what they said. The heroic little soul had broken down, and was lost in silent tears, and utterances in her heart of thanksgiving, deeper than words. No comic aspect of the scene appeared to her; she was not moved by its vulgarity or oddity. It was deliverance and safety to the minister's mother. Her son's honour and his living were alike safe, and his people had stood by Arthur. She sat for some time longer, lost in that haze of comfort and relief, afraid to move lest perhaps something untoward might still occur to change this

happy state of affairs—keen to detect any evil symptom, if such should occur, but unable to follow with any exactness the course of those addresses which still continued to be made in her hearing. She was not quite sure, indeed, whether anybody had spoken after Tozer, when, with a step much less firm than on her entrance, she went forth, wiping the tears that blinded her from under her veil, into the darkness and quiet of the street outside. But she knew that "resolutions" of support and sympathy had been carried by acclamation, and that somebody was deputed from the flock to assure the minister of its approval, and to offer him the new lease of popularity thus won for him in Salem. Mrs Vincent waited to hear no more. She got up softly and went forth on noiseless, weary feet, which faltered, now that her anxiety was over, with fatigue and agitation. Thankful to the bottom of her heart, yet at the same time doubly worn out with that deliverance, confused with the lights, the noises, and the excitement of the scene, and beginning already to take up her other burden, and to wonder by times, waking up with sharp touches of renewed anguish, how she might find Susan, and whether "any change" had appeared in her other child. It was thus that the great Salem congregational meeting, so renowned in the connection, ended for the minister's mother. She left them still making speeches when she emerged into

Grove Street. The political effect of Tozer's address, or the influence which his new doctrine might have on the denomination, did not occur to Mrs Vincent. She was thinking only of Arthur. Not even the darker human misery by her side had power to break through her preoccupation. How the gentle little woman had shaken off that anxious hand which grasped her old black dress, she never knew herself, nor could any one tell; somehow she had done it: alone, as she entered, she went away again—secret, but not clandestine, under that veil of her widowhood. She put it up from her face when she got into the street, and wiped her tears off with a trembling, joyful hand. She could not see her way clearly for those tears of joy. When they were dried, and the crape shadow put back from her face, Mrs Vincent looked up Grove Street, where her road lay in the darkness, broken by those flickering lamps. It was a windy night, and Dr Rider's drag went up past her rapidly, carrying the doctor home from some late visit, and recalling her thoughts to her own patient whom she had left so long. She quickened her tremulous steps as Dr Rider disappeared in the darkness; but almost before she had got beyond the last echoes of the Salem meeting, that shadow of darker woe and misery than any the poor mother wist of, was again by Mrs Vincent's side.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"You are not able to walk so fast," said Mrs Hilyard, coming up to the widow as she crossed over to the darker side of Grove Street, just where the house of the Miss Hemmings turned its lighted staircase-window to the street; "and it will not harm you to let me speak to you. Once you offered me your hand, and would have gone with me. It is a long long time ago —ages since—but *I* remember it. I do not come after you for nothing. Let me speak. You said you were a —a minister's wife, and knew human nature," she continued, with a certain pause of reverence, and at the same time a gleam of amusement, varying for a moment the blank and breathless voice in which she had spoken. "I want your advice."

Mrs Vincent, who had paused with an uncomfortable sensation of being pursued, recovered herself a little during this address. The minister's mother had no heart to linger and talk to any one at that moment,

after all the excitement of the evening, with her fatigued frame and occupied mind; but still she was the minister's mother, as ready and prepared as Arthur himself ought to have been, to hear anything that any of the flock might have to say to her, and to give all the benefit of her experience to anybody connected with Salem, who might be in trouble. "I beg your pardon," said Mrs Vincent; "my daughter is ill—that is why I was making so much haste; but I am sure, if I can be of any use to any member of—I mean to any of my son's friends"—she concluded rather abruptly. She did not remember much about this woman, who was strangely unlike the other people in Salem. When was that time in which they had met before? The widow's mind had been so swept by the whirlwind of events and emotions, that she remembered only dimly how and where it was she had formerly seen her strange companion.

"Your daughter is ill?" said Mrs Hilyard; "that is how trouble happens to you. You are a good woman; you don't interfere in God's business; and this is how your trouble comes. You can nurse her and be about her bed; and when she wakes up, it is to see you and be grateful to you. But *my* child," she said, touching the widow's arm suddenly with her hand, and suppressing painfully a shrill tone of anguish in her voice which would break through, "does not know

me. She opens her blue eyes—they are not even my eyes—they are Alice's eyes, who has no right to my child—and looks at me as if I were a stranger; and for all this time, since I parted with her, I have not heard—I do not know where she is. Hush, hush, hush!" she went on, speaking to herself, "to think that this is me, and that I should break down so at last. A woman has not soul enough to subdue her nerves for ever. But this is not what I wanted to say to you. I gave Miss Smith your son's address——"

Having said this, she paused, and looked anxiously at the widow, who looked at her also in the windy gleams of lamplight with more and more perplexity. "Who is Miss Smith?" asked poor Mrs Vincent. "Who are—you? Indeed, I am very sorry to seem rude; but my mind has been so much occupied. Arthur, of course, would know if he were here, but Susan's illness has taken up all my thoughts; and—I beg your pardon—she may want me even now," she continued, quickening her steps. Even the courtesy due to one of the flock had a limit; and the minister's mother knew it was necessary not to yield too completely to all the demands that her son's people might make upon her. Was this even one of her son's people? Such persons were unusual in the connection. Mrs Vincent, all fatigued, excited, and anxious as she was, felt at her wits' end.

"Yes, your son would know if he were here; he has taken my parole and trusted me," said the strange woman; "but a woman's parole should not be taken. I try to keep it; but unless they come, or I have news—— Who am I? I am a woman that was once young and had friends. They married me to a man, who was not a man, but a fine organisation capable of pleasures and cruelties. Don't speak. You are very good; you are a minister's wife. You don't know what it is, when one is young and happy, to find out all at once that life means only so much torture and misery, and so many lies, either done by you or borne by you—what does it matter which? My baby came into the world with a haze on her sweet soul because of that discovery. If it had been but her body!" said Mrs Vincent's strange companion, with bitterness. "A dwarfed creature, or deformed, or—— But she was beautiful—she *is* beautiful, as pretty as Alice; and if she lives, she will be rich. Hush, hush! you don't know what my fears were," continued Mrs Hilyard, with a strange humility, once more putting her hand on the widow's arm. "If he could have got possession of her, how could I tell what he might have done?—killed her—but that would have been dangerous; poisoned what little mind she had left—made her like her mother. I stole her away. Long ago, when I thought she might have been safe with you, I

meant to have told you. I stole her out of his power. For a little while she was with me, and he traced us—then I sent the child away. I have not seen her but in glimpses, lest he should find her. It has cost me all I had, and I have lived and worked with my hands," said the needlewoman of Back Grove Street, lifting her thin fingers to the light and looking at them, pathetic vouchers to the truth of her story. "When he drove me desperate," she went on, labouring in vain to conceal the panting, long-drawn breath which impeded her utterance, "you know? I don't talk of that. The child put her arms round that old woman after her mother had saved her. She had not a word, not a word for me, who had done—— But it was all for her sake. This is what I have had to suffer. She looked in my face and waved me away from her and said, 'Susan, Susan!' Susan meant your daughter—a new friend, a creature whom she had not seen a week before—and no word, no look, no recognition for me!"

"Oh, I am very sorry, very sorry!" said Mrs Vincent, in her turn taking the poor thin hand with an instinct of consolation. Susan's name, thus introduced, went to the mother's heart. She could have wept over the other mother thus complaining, moaning out her troubles in her compassionate ear.

"I left them in a safe place. I came home to fall into your son's hands. He might have been sure, had

it come to *that*, that no one should have suffered for *me*," said Mrs Hilyard, with again a tone of bitterness. "What was my life worth, could any man suppose? And since then I have not heard a word—not a word—whether the child is still where I left her, or whether some of *his* people have found her—or whether she is ill—or whether—I know nothing, nothing! Have a little pity upon me, you innocent woman! I never asked pity, never sought sympathy before; but a woman can never tell what she may be brought to. I am brought down to the lowest depths. I cannot stand upright any longer," she cried, with a wailing sigh. "I want somebody—somebody at least to give me a little comfort. Comfort! I remember," she said, with one of those sudden changes of tone which bewildered Mrs Vincent, "your son once spoke to me of getting comfort from those innocent young sermons of his. He knows a little better now; he does not sail over the surface now as he used to do in triumph. Life has gone hard with him, as with me and all of us. Tell him, if I get no news I will break my parole. I cannot help myself—a woman's honour is not her word. I told him so. Say to your son——"

"My son? what have you to do with my son?" said Mrs Vincent, with a sudden pang. The poor mother was but a woman too. She did not understand what this connection was. A worn creature, not much

younger than herself, what possible tie could bind her to Arthur? The widow, like other women, could believe in any "infatuation" of men; but could not understand any other bond subsisting between these two. The thought went to her heart. Young men had been known before now to be mysteriously attracted by women old, unbeautiful, unlike themselves. Could this be Arthur's fate? Perhaps it was a danger more dismal than that which he had just escaped in Salem. Mrs Vincent grew sick at heart. She repeated, with an asperity of which her soft voice might have been thought incapable, "What have you to do with my son?"

Mrs Hilyard made no answer—perhaps she did not hear the question. Her eyes, always restlessly turning from one object to another, had found out, in the lighted street to which they had now come, a belated postman delivering his last letters. She followed him with devouring looks; he went to Vincent's door as they approached, delivered something, and passed on into the darkness with a careless whistle. While Mrs Vincent watched her companion with doubtful and suspicious looks through the veil which, once more among the lights of Grange Street, the minister's mother had drawn over her face, the unconscious object of her suspicion grasped her arm, and turned to her with beseeching eyes. "It may be news of my

child?" she said, with a supplication beyond words. She drew the widow on with the desperation of her anxiety. The little maid had still the letter in her hand when she opened the door. It was not even for Mr Vincent. It was for the mistress of the house, who had not yet returned from the meeting at Salem. Mrs Vincent paused upon the threshold, compassionate but determined. She looked at the unhappy woman who stood upon the steps in the light of the lamp, gazing eagerly in at the door, and resolved that she should penetrate no farther; but even in the height of her determination the widow's heart smote her when she looked at that face, so haggard and worn with passion and anxiety, with its furtive gleaming eyes, and all the dark lines of endurance which were so apparent now, when the tide of emotion had grown too strong to be concealed. "Have you—no—friends in Carlingford?" said the widow, with hesitation and involuntary pity. She could not ask her to enter where, perhaps, her presence might be baleful to Arthur; but the little woman's tender heart ached, even in the midst of her severity, for the suffering in that face.

"Nowhere!" said Mrs Hilyard; then, with a gleam out of her eyes which took the place of a smile, "Do not be sorry for me; I want no friends—nobody could share my burden with me. I am going back—home

—to Alice. Tell Mr Vincent; I think something must happen to-night," she added, with a slight shiver; "it grows intolerable, beyond bearing. Perhaps by the telegraph—or perhaps—— And Miss Smith has this address. I told you my story," she went on, drawing closer, and taking the widow's hand, "that you might have pity on me, and understand—no, not understand; how could she?—but if you were like me, do you think you could sit still in one place, with so much upon your heart? You never could be like me—but if you had lost your child——"

"I did," said Mrs Vincent, drawing a painful breath at the recollection, and drawn unwittingly by the sight of the terrible anxiety before her into a reciprocation of confidence—"my child who had been in my arms all her life—God gave her back again; and now, while I am speaking, He may be taking her away," said the mother, with a sudden return of all her anxiety. "I cannot do you any good, and Susan may want me: good-night—good-night."

"It was not God who gave her back to you," said Mrs Hilyard, grasping the widow's hand closer—"it was I—remember it was I. When you think hardly of me, recollect—I did it. She might have been—but I freed her—remember; and if you hear anything, if it were but a whisper, of my child, think of it, and have pity on me. You will?—you understand what I say?"

The widow drew away her hand with a pang of fear. She retreated hurriedly, yet with what dignity she could, calling the little maid to shut the door. When that strange face, all gleaming, haggard, and anxious, was shut out into the night, Mrs Vincent went up-stairs very hastily, scarcely able to give her alarmed withdrawal the aspect of an orderly retreat. Was this woman mad to whom she had been speaking so calmly? In her agitation she forgot all the precautions with which she had intended to soften to her son the fact of her attendance at that meeting of which he had not even informed her. Pursued by the recollection of that face, she hastened to Arthur, still in her bonnet and veil. He was seated at the table writing as when she left him; but all the minister's self-control could not conceal a certain expectancy and excitement in the eyes which he raised with a flash of eager curiosity to see who it was that thus invaded his solitude. "Mother! where have you been?" he asked, with irritation, when he perceived her. His impatience and anxiety, and the great effort he had made to subdue both, betrayed him into a momentary outburst of annoyance and vexation. "Where have you been?" he repeated, throwing down his pen. "Surely not to this meeting, to compromise me, as if I had not trouble enough already!" This rude accost put her immediate subject out of Mrs Vincent's mind: she went up

to her son with deprecating looks, and put her hand fondly on his head. The tears came into her eyes, not because his words offended or grieved her, but for joy of the good news she had to tell; for the minister's mother was experienced in the ways of man, and knew how many things a woman does for love which she gets no thanks for doing. Her boy's anger did not make her angry, but it drove other matters, less important, out of her head.

"Oh, Arthur, no one saw me," she said; "I had my veil down all the time. How could I help going when I knew of it? I did not tell you—I did not mean you to know; but it was impossible to stay away," cried the widow, perceiving her son's impatience while she explained herself, and growing confused in consequence, "when I heard what was going on. Oh, Arthur dear, don't look so disturbed; they know better than you imagine—they appreciate you, though they have not the way of showing it. I have seen things happen so differently, that I know the value of such friends as you have in the flock. Oh, my dear boy, don't look so strange! It has been a great triumph, Arthur. There is a deputation coming to offer you their support and sympathy. All this dreadful business has not harmed *you*. Thank God for that! I think I shall be able to bear anything now."

The minister got up hastily from his chair, and took

refuge on the hearth-rug. He changed colour; grew red and grew pale; and by way of escaping from the complication of feelings that moved him, once more broke out into impatient exclamations. "Why did you go? Why did not you tell me you were going?" he said. "Why did you leave Susan, who wanted you? Mother, you will never understand that a man's affairs must not be meddled with!" cried the Nonconformist, with an instinctive effort to conceal the agitation into which this unexpected news threw him. Then he began to pace about the room, exclaiming against the impatience of women, who can never wait for a result. The young man was too proud to acknowledge the state of feverish suspense in which he had been, or the wonderful tumult suddenly produced in his mind. He seized upon this ready safety-valve of irritation, which was half real and half fictitious. It gave him time to collect his troubled thoughts.

"Arthur dear, hush! no one saw me at the meeting. I had my veil down, and spoke to nobody," said the widow: "and oh! don't you think it was only natural that your mother should be there? No one in the world is so much interested in what concerns you. I spoke to no one—except," said Mrs Vincent, with a little effort, "that strange woman, Arthur, whom you have had so much to do with. Who is she? Oh, my dear boy, I hope you have not formed any connections

that you will repent? She said something about a promise, and having given her word. I don't know why you should have her word, or what she has to do with you. She came here to the door with me to-night."

"Mrs Hilyard!" cried the minister, suddenly roused. "Mrs——; no matter what her name is. Where is she? Do you mean that she came here? They keep no watch over her. To-night of all nights in the world! If you had but stayed at home, I should not have known of her wanderings at least," he said, with vexation. "Now I shall have to go and look after her—she must be sent back again—she must not be allowed to escape."

"Is she mad?" said Mrs Vincent, alarmed, yet relieved. "Don't go away, Arthur; she is not here. She said I was to tell you that she had gone back—to Alice. Who is Alice?—who is this woman? What have you to do with her? Oh! my dear boy, you are a minister, and the world is so ready to make remarks. She said you had her word. Oh, Arthur, I hope it does not mean anything you will live to repent?" cried the anxious mother, fixing her jealous eyes on her son's face. "She is not like you. I cannot tell what you can have to do with such a woman—you who might——" Mrs Vincent's fright and anxiety exhausted both her language and her breath.

"It does not matter much after all," said the Nonconformist, who had been busy with his own thoughts, and had only half heard his mother's adjurations. "Like me?—what has that to do with the matter? But I daresay she will go back, as she said; and now that he is out of danger, and has not accused her, things must take their chance. Mad? It would not be wonderful if she were mad. I can sympathise with people when they are driven out of their wits. Who is this next? Another messenger from the meeting, or perhaps your deputation? I think *I* shall go mad after a while if I get no rest."

But as the minister stood in ill-concealed excitement by the fire, not without expectation that it might be somebody with an official report from Salem, Mr Vincent's landlady, still in her bonnet and shawl, just returned from the meeting, came in to tell the widow of the approach of the doctor. "He's a-coming directly, ma'am; he's gone in for a minute to Smith's, next door, where they've got the hooping-cough. And oh, Mr Vincent, sir," cried the woman, who had made this a pretence to express her sentiments on the more important subject, "if there hasn't a-been a sweet meeting! I'd have giv' a half-year's rent, ma'am, the pastor had been there. All as unanimous and as friendly!—all but them Pigeons, as are the poison of the place; and sweet Miss Phœbe Tozer a-crying of her pretty

eyes out; but there ain't no occasion for crying now," said the triumphant landlady, who had a real stake in the matter. At this touch the minister regained his composure. He went back to his seat at the table, and took up the pen he had thrown down. A bishop could not have looked more grandly indifferent than did the Nonconformist as he turned his back upon his anxious partisan. "Tell the doctor to let me know how Susan is, mother, for I am busy to-night," said the young man. "I cannot leave my work just now even for Dr Rider." He began again to write in the excitement of his mind, and produced a sentence which was not one of the least successful of his sentences, while the two women with a certain awe stood silent behind his chair.

"I will not disturb you any longer, my dear boy. Good-night," said Mrs Vincent. She went away, followed by the discomfited landlady, who was overwhelmed, and did not know what to make of it. The widow could not but improve such an opportunity. "The minister must not be disturbed in his studies," she said, with importance and in a whisper as she closed the door. "When he is engaged with a subject, it does not answer to go in upon him and disturb his attention. Neither meetings nor anything else, however important, should interrupt a pastor when he is engaged in composition," said the little woman, grandly.

But while the mistress of the house departed to her own quarter much overawed, the minister's mother went to the sick-room with no such composure as she assumed. Something she did not understand was in Arthur's mind. The Salem meeting did not appear to her so conclusive as it had done an hour ago. He was young and high-spirited and proud, and had not that dutiful subjection to the opinions of the flock which became a minister of Salem. What if that visionary horror with which she had frightened Tozer might turn out a real danger? Though she had made such skilful use of it, the possibility she had herself invented had not really alarmed her; but the thought thrilled through her now with a fear which had some remorse in it. She had invoked the ghost, not much believing in any such supernatural climax; but if the apparition really made itself visible, the widow recognised at once her entire want of any power to lay it. She took off her shawl and bonnet with little comfort in her mind on that subject to support her under the returning pangs of anxiety about Susan, which overwhelmed her again as she opened the door of the sick-room. The two troubles united in her heart and aggravated each other, as with a sick throb of expectation she went in to Susan's bedside. Perhaps there might be "a change" —for better or for worse, something might have happened. The doctor might find something more con-

clusive to-night in that languid pallid face. The noiseless room struck her with a chill of misery as she went to her usual place, carrying the active life of pain and a troubled heart into that melancholy atmosphere from which life seemed to have fled. With a faltering voice she spoke to Susan, who showed no signs of hearing her except by a feeble half-lifting of her heavy eyelids and restless motion of her frame. No change! Never any change! or, at least, as the nurse imagined, until—— The widow's heart heaved with a silent sob of anguish—anguish sharp and acute as it is when our misery breaks suddenly upon us out of a veil of other thoughts, and we feel it intolerable. This sudden pang convulsed Mrs Vincent's much-tried heart as she wiped the bitter tears out of her eyes and looked at her child, thus gliding, in a hopeless apathy and unconsciousness, out of the arms that strained themselves in vain to hold her. After so much as she had borne in her troubled life, God knows it was hard. She did not rebel, but her heart lifted up a bitter cry to the Father in heaven.

It was just then, while her anxious ear caught the step of the doctor on the stair, that Mrs Vincent was aware also of a carriage driving rapidly up to the door. Preoccupied as she was, the sound startled her. A passing wonder who it could be, and the vague expectation which influences the mind at the great crises of

life, when one feels that anything may happen, moved her dimly as she rose to receive the doctor. Dr Rider came in with his noiseless step and anxious face; they shook hands with each other mechanically, she gazing at him to see what his opinion was before it could be formed—he looking with solicitous serious eyes on the sick-bed. The light was dim, and Dr Rider held it up to see his patient. There she lay, moving now and then with the restlessness of weakness, the pale large eyelids half closed, the pale lips dropping apart,—a solemn speechless creature, abstracted already out of this world and all its influences. The light that streamed over her for the moment made no difference to Susan. There was nothing here powerful enough to rouse the soul which horror and passion had driven into one terrible corner of memory, obliterating all the rest of her life. Dr Rider looked at her with eyes in which the impatience of powerless strength overcame even his professional reserve. He wrung the widow's hand, which she laid on his arm in a trembling appeal to him to tell her the worst. "The worst is that she is dying before our eyes, and that she might be saved," he said, leading the poor mother to the other end of the room. "All her heart and soul are concentrated upon that time when she was away from you; unless we can rouse her by something that will recall that time, she will never know you more. Think! is there nothing

that would wake her up even to remember the misery she endured? Where is your servant who was with her?—but she has seen her lately, and nothing has come of that. If you have the courage and strength," said the doctor, once more grasping Mrs Vincent's hand tight, "to talk of that man under the name she knew him by—to talk of him so as perhaps she might hear; to discuss the matter; anything that will recall her mind. Hush! what is that noise down-stairs?"

Even while listening to the doctor's dreadful suggestion, Mrs Vincent had been aware of the opening of the door down-stairs, and of a sound of voices. She was trembling so that she could scarcely stand, principally, no doubt, on account of this strange demand which he made upon her strength, but with a nervous expectation besides which she could not explain even to herself. But when, out of that confused commotion below, there rose faint but audible the sound of a voice calling "Susan! Susan!" the two anxious people started apart, and turned a wondering momentary gaze upon each other, involuntarily asking what was that? what did it mean? Then the doctor rushed to the door, where the widow followed him as well as her trembling limbs would permit. She saw him dash down-stairs, and herself stood grasping the railing, waiting for what was about to happen, with her heart so beating and fluttering in her breast that

she could scarcely breathe for it. She could make nothing of the rapid interrogation that went on downstairs. She heard the voice of the doctor in hasty questions, and the slow, agitated, somewhat confused utterance of a strange voice, which appeared to answer him; and once or twice through these sounds came the strange cry, "Susan! Susan!" which went to the widow's heart. Who could this be that called upon Susan with so pathetic a repetition? It seemed a very long interval to Mrs Vincent before the doctor reappeared, and yet so short was the time, that the door by which the new-comers, whoever they were, had entered, was still open, admitting some strange familiar sounds from the street into the bewildering maze of wonder and expectation. Mrs Vincent held fast by the rails to support herself, when she saw the doctor returning up the stair, leading by the hand a girl whom he grasped fast, and carried along with him by a kind of gentle but strong compulsion. It was she who was calling Susan, gazing round her with large dilated blue eyes, looking everywhere for something she had not yet found. A beautiful girl—more beautiful than anything mortal to the widow's surprised and wondering eyes. Who was she? The face was very young, sadly simple, framed by long curling locks of fair hair, and the broad circle of a large flapping Leghorn hat and blue veil. A bewildered half-recognition

came to Mrs Vincent's mind as this blue veil waved in her face in the wind from the open door; but excitement and anxiety had deprived her of speech: she could ask no questions. "Here is the physician," said Dr Rider, with a kindred excitement in his voice. He went into the room before her, leading the girl, behind whom there followed slowly a confused and disturbed woman, whose face Mrs Vincent felt she had seen before. The mother, half jealous in her wonder, pressed in after the doctor to guard her Susan even from experiments of healing. "Doctor, doctor, who is it?" she said. But Dr Rider held up his hand imperatively to silence her. The room was imperfectly lighted with candles burning dimly, and a faint glow of firelight. "Susan!" cried the eager child's voice, with a weary echo of longing and disappointment. "Susan!—take me to Susan; she is not here." Then Dr Rider led her round to the bedside, closely followed by the widow, and, lifting a candle, threw its light fully upon the stranger. "Is it Susan?" said the girl. "Will she not speak to me?—is she dead? Susan, oh Susan, Susan!" It was an outcry of childish impatience and despair, rising louder than any voice had risen in that room for many a day. Then she burst forth into tears and sobs. "Susan!—she will not speak to me, she will not look at me!" cried the stranger, drawing her arm out of the doctor's hold,

and clasping her hands together. There was a slight movement in the bed; not the restless tossing with which her nurse was familiar, but a trembling shiver came over that dying frame. The sound had reached to the dull ears of the patient. She lifted her heavy eyelids, and looked round with half-awakened eyes. "Call her again, again!" said the doctor, in an intense whisper, which seemed to thrill through the room. The girl, who was engaged with a much more engrossing interest of her own, took no notice of the doctor. She knew nothing about Susan's danger—she was bent on gaining succour for herself. "Susan! tell her to look at me—at me! Susan! I care for nobody but you!" said the lovely helpless creature, with strange half-articulate cries, pressing closer to the bed. "*You* are to take care of me." Mrs Vincent pressed forward with pangs of anxiety, of terror, of hope, and of a mother's tender jealousy through all, as these strange entreaties filled the room. She too cried aloud, as she perceived the awakening in that pallid face, the faint movement as if to raise herself up, which indicated a conscious effort on the part of Susan. The clouds were breaking on that obscured and hopeless firmament. The light, which trembled in the doctor's hand, caught a gleam of understanding and life in Susan's eyes, as her mother flew to raise her up, obeying the suggestion of that unhoped-for movement.

"Susan! you said you would take care of me!" cried the young stranger, throwing herself upon the bedside and grasping at the weak arm which once had protected her. The touch of her hands awoke the slumbering soul. Slowly the light grew in Susan's eyes. She who had not moved for days except in the restless tossings of languor, lifted those white feeble arms to put them round the appealing child. Then Susan struggled up, faint, yet inspired, unconscious of her mother's help that enabled her to do so, and confronted the strange people in her room, whom she had seen for weeks past, but did not know, with living eyes. "Nobody shall touch her—we will protect each other," said the voice that had grown strange even to her mother's ears. Mrs Vincent could hardly be restrained from breaking in with a thousand caresses and outcries of joy and thankfulness. But Dr Rider quieted the poor mother with a touch of his hand. "Let them alone," he said, with that authority which no one in a sick-room can resist. Mrs Vincent kept back with unspeakable pangs in her heart, and watched the waking up of that paralysed life which, alike in its loss and its recovery, had been swept apart from her into another world. Without any help from her mother, without even recognising her mother or distinguishing her from the strangers round, Susan's soul awoke. She raised herself more and more among those pillows

where a little while ago she lay so passively—she opened her eyes fully and looked round upon the man by her bedside, and the other indistinct figures in the room, with a look of resistance and conscious strength. "We will protect each other," said Susan, slowly; "nobody shall harm her—we will keep each other safe." Then, after another interval, other instincts awoke in the reviving soul. She cast a wistful look from one to another, always drawing her faint white arm round the girl who clung to her and found security in her clasp. "Hush, hush! there are women here," she said in a whisper, and with a tone of strange confusion, light breaking through the darkness. Then there followed a long pause. Dr Rider stood by the bedside holding up his candle, attracting the wandering wistful glances of his patient, who ceased to look at him with defiance as her eyes again and again returned to the face, of which, often as it had bent over her, she had no knowledge. All over the unknown room wandered those strange looks, interrogating everything with a wistfulness beyond words. What was this strange unfamiliar world into which, after her trance of suffering, Susan had awakened? She did not know where she was, nor who the people were who surrounded her. But the recollection of deadly peril was not more distinct upon her confused mind than was the sentiment of safety, of love, and watch-

fulness which somehow abode in this strange dim room, in the little undecipherable circle of faces which surrounded her bed. "Hush!" said Susan again, holding the stranger close. "Here are women — women! nobody will harm us;" then, with a sudden flush over all her face and cry of joy as the doctor suddenly threw the light full upon Mrs Vincent, who was bending over her, her mind struggled into possession of itself,—"Here is my mother! she has come to take us home!"

Mrs Vincent remembered nothing more; she did not faint, for her child wanted her—she sat all the night through on the bed, with Susan leaning against her shoulder, clinging to her, holding her fast—starting again and again to make sure that all was safe, and that it was, indeed, her mother's arms that held her. Her soul was recalled out of that trance of death. They laid the beautiful child upon the sofa in her young guardian's sight, to keep up that happy influence; and when the night was about half spent, the widow, throbbing all over her wearied frame with exhaustion, pain, and joy, perceived that her Susan had fallen deep and sweet asleep, clasping close, as if never again to lose hold of them, her mother's tender hands.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE after-events of the evening naturally lessened, in the minister's family at least, the all-absorbing interest of the meeting at Salem. Even Mr Vincent's landlady, in her wondering narrative of the scene in the sick-room—which, all Mrs Vincent's usual decorums being thrust aside by that unexpected occurrence, she had witnessed—forgot the other public event which was of equally great importance. The house was in a state of agitation as great as on Susan's return; and when the exulting doctor, whose experiment had been so rarely successful, turned all supernumerary persons out of the sick-room, it fell to Vincent's part to take charge of the perplexed governess, Miss Smith, who stood outside, anxious to offer explanations, a fatigued and harassed, but perfectly virtuous and exemplary woman. Vincent, who had not realised his sister's extreme peril, and who was rather disconcerted by this fresh invasion of his house, opened the door of

his sitting-room for her with more annoyance than hospitality. His own affairs were urgent in his mind. He could not keep his thoughts from dwelling upon Salem and what had occurred there, though no one else thought of it. Had he known the danger in which his sister lay, his heart might have rejected every secondary matter. But the minister did not know that Susan had been sinking into the last apathy when this sudden arrival saved her. He gave Miss Smith the easy-chair by the fire, and listened with an appearance of attention, but with little real understanding, to her lengthy and perplexed story. She was all in a flutter, the good governess said: everything was so mysterious and out of the way, she did not know what to think. Little Alice's mamma, Miss Russell that was, Mrs Mildmay she meant, had brought the child back to her after that dreadful business at Dover. What was the rights of that business, could Mr Vincent tell her? Colonel Mildmay was getting better, she knew, and it was not a murder; and she was heart-broken when she heard the trouble poor dear Miss Vincent had got into about it. Well, Alice's mamma brought back the child, and they started with her at once to France. They went up beyond Lyons to the hills, an out-of-the-way little place, but Mrs Mildmay was always so nervous. "And then she left us, Mr Vincent," said the afflicted governess, as the minister,

in grievous impatience, kept pacing up and down the room thus occupied and taken possession of—"left us without a soul to speak to or a church within reach; and if there is one thing I have more horror of than another for its effect upon the youthful mind, it is Popery, which is so seductive to the imagination. Alice did not take to her mamma, Mr Vincent. It was natural enough, but it was hard upon Mrs Mildmay: she never had a good way with children; and from the moment we started till now, it has been impossible to get your sister out of the child's mind. She took a fancy to her the moment she saw her. Girls of that age, if you will not think it strange of me to say so, very often fall in love with a girl older than themselves—quite fall in love, though it is a strange thing to say. Alice would not rest—she gave me no peace. I wrote to say so, but I think Mrs Mildmay could not have got my letter. The child would have run away by herself if I had not brought her. Besides," said Miss Smith, apologetically, "the doctors have assured me that, if she ever became much interested in any one, or attached to anybody in particular, she was not to be crossed. It was the best chance for her mind, the doctors said. What could I do? What do you think I could do, Mr Vincent? I brought her home, for I could not help myself—otherwise she would have run away. She has a very strong will,

though she looks so gentle. I hope you will help me to explain the circumstances to Mrs Mildmay, and how it was I came back without her authority. Don't you think they ought to call in the friends on both sides and come to some arrangement, Mr Vincent?" said the excellent woman, anxiously. "I know she trusts you very much, and it was she herself who gave me your address."

To this speech Vincent listened with an impatience and restlessness which he found it impossible to conceal. He paced about the darker end of his room, on the other side of that table, where the lamp shone vacantly upon his open desk and scattered papers, answering now and then with a monosyllable of reluctant courtesy, irritated and disturbed beyond expression by the perfectly serious and proper figure seated by the fire. Somebody might come from that assembly which had met to discuss him, and he could not be alone to receive them. In the annoyance of the moment the minister almost chafed at his sister and her concerns. His life was invaded by these women, with their mysteries and agonies. He listened to the steps outside, thinking every moment to hear the steady tramp of the deputation from Salem, or at least Tozer, whom it would have been balm to his mind, in the height of the good man's triumph, to cut short and annihilate. But how do that, or anything else, with

this woman seated by his fire explaining her unintelligible affairs? Such was Vincent's state of mind while his mother, in an agony of joy, was hearing from Susan's lips, for the first time, broken explanations of those few days of her life which outbalanced in terrible importance all its preceding years. The minister did not know that his sister's very existence, as well as her reason, hung upon that unhoped-for opening of her mouth and her heart.

Matters were not much mended when Dr Rider came in, beaming and radiant, full of congratulations. Susan was saved. It was the most curious psychological puzzle, the doctor said; all her life had got concentrated into the few days between her departure from Lonsdale and her arrival at Carlingford. Neither her old existence, nor the objects that surrounded her at the moment, had any significance for Susan; only something that belonged to that wonderful interval in which she had been driven desperate, could win back consciousness to her mind. It was the most singular case he had ever met with; but he knew this was the only way of treating it, and so it had proved. He recognised the girl with the blue veil the moment he saw her—he knew it could be no other. Who was she? where had she sprung from at that critical moment? where had she been? what was to be done with her? Dr Rider poured forth his questions like a stream.

He was full of professional triumph, not to say natural satisfaction. He could not understand how his patient's brother, at that wonderful crisis, could have a mind preoccupied or engaged with other things. The doctor turned with lively sympathy and curiosity from the anxious Nonconformist to Miss Smith, who was but too willing to begin all her explanations over again. Dr Rider, accustomed to hear many personal narratives, collected this story a great deal more clearly than Vincent, who was so much more interested in it, had, with all his opportunities, been able to do. How long the poor minister might have suffered under this conversation, it is impossible to tell. But Mrs Vincent, in all the agitation of her daughter's deliverance, could not forget the griefs of others. She sent a little message to her son, begging that he would send word of this arrival to "the poor lady." "To let her know—but she must not come here to-night," was the widow's message, who was just then having the room darkened, and everything arranged for the night, if perhaps her child might sleep. This message delivered the minister; it recalled Miss Smith to her duty. She it was who must go and explain everything to her patroness. Dr Rider, whose much-excited wonder was still further stimulated by hearing that the child's mother was at Lady Western's, that she was Mrs Mildmay, and that the Nonconformist was in her confidence, cheerfully

undertook to carry the governess in his drag to Grange Lane, not without hopes of further information ; and it was now getting late. Miss Smith made Vincent a tremulous curtsy, and held out her hand to him to say good-night. "The doctor will perhaps explain to Mrs Mildmay why I have left little Alice," said the troubled woman. "I never left her before since she was intrusted to me—never but when her papa stole her away ; and you are a minister, Mr Vincent, and oh, I hope I am doing quite right, and as Alice's mamma will approve ! But if she disapproves I must come back and——"

"They must not be disturbed to-night," said Dr Rider, promptly ; "I will see Mrs Mildmay." He was not reluctant to see Mrs Mildmay. The doctor, though he was not a gossip, was not inaccessible to the pleasure of knowing more than anybody else of the complications of this strange business, which still afforded matter of talk to Carlingford. He hurried her away while still the good governess was all in a flutter, and for the first time the minister was left alone. It was with a troubled mind that the young man resumed his seat at his desk. He began to get utterly weary of this business, and all about it. If he could only have swept away in a whirlwind, with his mother and sister, where the name of Mildmay had never been heard of, and where he could for ever get rid of that haunting

woman with her gleaming eyes, who had pursued even his gentle mother to the door! but this new complication seemed to involve him deeper than ever in those strange bonds. It was with a certain disgust that the minister thought it all over as he sat leaning his head on his hands. His way was dark before him, yet it must speedily be decided. Everything was at a crisis in his excited mind and troubled life—even that strange lovely child's face, which had roused Susan from her apathy, had its share in the excitement of her brother's thoughts; for it was but another version, with differences, of the face of that other Alice, who all unwittingly had procured for Vincent the sweetest and the hardest hours he had spent in Carlingford. Were they all to pass like a dream—her smiles, her sweet looks, her kind words, even that magical touch upon his arm, which had once charmed him out of all his troubles? A groan came out of the young man's heart, not loud, but deep, as that thought moved him. The very despair of this love-dream had been more exquisite than any pleasure of his life. Was it all to pass away and be no longer? Life and thought, the actual and the visionary, had both come to a climax, and seemed to stand still, waiting the decision which must be come to that night.

From these musings the entrance of Tozer roused the minister. The excellent butterman came in all

flushed and glowing from his success. To him, the meeting, which already the Nonconformist had half lost sight of under the superstructure of subsequent events, had newly concluded, and was the one occurrence of the time. The cheers which had hailed him master of the field were still ringing in Tozer's ears. "I don't deny as I am intoxicated-like," said the excellent deacon; "them cheers was enough to carry any man off his legs, sir, if you'll believe me. We've scattered the enemy, that's what we've been and done, Mr Vincent. There ain't one of them as will dare show face in Salem. We was unanimous, sir—*un*animous, that's what we was! I never see such a triumph in our connection. Hurrah! If it warn't Miss as is ill, I could give it you all over again, cheers and all."

"I am glad you were pleased," said Vincent, with an effort; "but I will not ask you for such a report of the proceedings."

"Pleased! I'll tell you one thing as I was sorry for, sir," said Tozer, somewhat subdued in his exultation by the pastor's calmness—"I did it for the best; but seeing as things have turned out so well, I am as sorry as I can be—and that is, that you wasn't there. It was from expecting some unpleasantness as I asked you not to come; but things turning out as they did, it would have done your heart good to see 'em, Mr Vincent. Salem folks has a deal of sense when you put things

before them effective. And then you'd only have had to say three words to them on the spur of the moment, and all was settled and done with, and everything put straight; which would have let them settle down steady, sir, at once, and not kept no excitement, as it were, hanging about."

"Yes," said the minister, who was moving about his papers, and did not look up. The butterman began to be alarmed; he grew more and more enthusiastic the less response he met with.

"It's a meeting as will tell in the connection," said Tozer, with unconscious foresight; "a candid mind in a congregation ain't so general as you and me would like to see, Mr Vincent, and it takes a bit of a trial like this, sir, and opposition, to bring out the real attachment as is between a pastor and a flock."

"Yes," said Vincent again. The deacon did not know what to make of the minister. Had he been piqued and angry, Tozer thought he might have known how to manage him, but this coldness was an alarming and mysterious symptom which he was unequal to. In his embarrassment and anxiety the good butterman stumbled upon the very subject from which, had he known the true state of affairs, he would have kept aloof.

"And the meeting as was to be to-morrow night?" said Tozer; "there ain't no need for explanations now

—a word or two out of the pulpit is all as is wanted, just to say as it's all over, and you're grateful for their attachment, and so forth; you know a deal better, sir, how to do it nor me. And about the meeting as was called for to-morrow night?—me and the misses were thinking, though it's sudden, as it might be turned into a tea-meeting, if you was agreeable, just to make things pleasant; or if that ain't according to your fancy, as I'm aware you're not one as likes tea-meetings, we might send round, Mr Vincent, to all the seat-holders to say as it's given up; I'd do one or the other, if you'd be advised by me."

"Thank you—but I can't do either one or the other," said the Nonconformist. "I would not have asked the people to meet me if I had not had something to say to them—and this night's business, you understand," said Vincent, with a little pride, "has made no difference in me."

"No, sir, no—to be sure not," said the perplexed butterman, much bewildered; "but two meetings on two nights consecutive is running the flock hard, it is. I'd give up to-morrow, Mr Vincent, if I was you."

To this insinuating address the minister made no answer—he only shook his head. Poor Tozer, out of his exultation, fell again into the depths. The blow was so unlooked-for that it overwhelmed him.

"You'll not go and make no reflections, sir?" said

the troubled deacon; "bygones is bygones. You'll not bring it up against them, as they didn't show that sympathy they might have done? You'll not make no reference to nobody in particular, Mr Vincent? When a flock is conscious as they've done their duty and stood by their pastor, it ain't a safe thing, sir, not to turn upon them, and rake up things as is past. If you'll take my advice, sir, as wishes you well, and hasn't no motive but your good, I'd not hold that meeting, Mr Vincent; or, if you're bent upon it, say the word, and we'll set to work and give 'em a tea-meeting, and make all things comfortable. But if you was prudent, sir, and would go by my advice, one or the other of them two is what I would do."

"Thank you, Tozer, all the same," said Vincent, who, notwithstanding his preoccupation, saw the good butterman's anxiety, and appreciated it. "I know very well that all that is pleasant to-night is owing to you. Don't suppose I don't understand how you've fought for me; but now the business is mine, and I can take no more advice. Think no more of it; you have done all that you could do."

"I have done my humble endeavour, sir, as is my dooty, to keep things straight," said the deacon, doubtfully; "and if you'd tell me what was in your mind, Mr Vincent——?"

But the young Nonconformist gathered up his

papers, closed his desk, and held out his hand to the kind-hearted butterman. "My sister has come back almost from the grave to-night," said Vincent; "and we are all, for anything I can see, at the turning-point of our lives. You have done all you can do, and I thank you heartily; but now the business is in my hands."

This was all the satisfaction Tozer got from the minister. He went home much discouraged, not knowing what to make of it, but did not confide his fears even to his wife, hoping that reflection would change the pastor's mind, and resolved to make another effort to-morrow. And so the night fell over the troubled house. In the sick-room a joyful agitation had taken the place of the dark and hopeless calm. Susan, roused to life, lay leaning against her mother, looking at the child asleep on the sofa by her, unconscious of the long and terrible interval between the danger which that child had shared, and the delicious security to which her mind had all at once awakened. To Susan's consciousness, it appeared as if her mother had suddenly risen out of the mists, and delivered the two helpless creatures who had suffered together. She could not press close enough to this guardian of her life. She held her arms round her, and laid her cheek against the widow's with the dependence of a child upon her mother's bosom. Mrs Vincent sat upon the

bed supporting her, herself supported in her weariness by love and joy, two divine attendants who go but seldom together. The two talked in whispers,—Susan because of her feebleness, the mother in the instinct of caressing tenderness. The poor girl told her story in broken syllables—broken by the widow's kisses and murmurs of sympathy, of wonder and love. Healing breathed upon the stricken mind and feeble frame as the two clung together in the silent night, always with an unspoken reference to the beautiful forlorn creature on the sofa—that visible symbol of all the terrors and troubles past. "I told her my mother would come to save us," said poor Susan. When she dropt to sleep at last, the mother leant her aching frame upon some pillows, afraid to move, and slept too, supreme protector, in her tender weakness, of these two young lives. As she woke from time to time to see her child sleeping by her side, thoughts of her son's deliverance stole across Mrs Vincent's mind to sweeten her repose. The watch-light burned dimly in the room, and threw a gigantic shadow of her little figure, half erect on the side of the bed, still in her black gown and the close white cap, which could not be less than dainty in its neatness, even in that vigil, upon the further wall. The widow slept only in snatches, waking often and keeping awake, as people do when they grow old; her thoughts, ever alive and active, varying between her

projects for the future, to save Susan from all painful knowledge of her own story, and the thankful recollection of Arthur's rescue from his troubles. From echoes of Tozer's speech, and of the cheers of the flock, her imagination wandered off into calculations of how she could find another place of habitation as pleasant, perhaps, as Lonsdale, and even to the details of her removal from thence, what portions of her furniture she would sell, and which take with her. "For now that Arthur has got out of his troubles, we must not stay to get him into fresh difficulties with his flock," she said to herself, with a momentary ache in her thankful heart; and so dropped asleep for another half-hour, to wake again presently, and enter anew into the whole question. Such was the way in which Mrs Vincent passed that agitated but joyful night.

In the adjoining room Arthur sat up late over his papers. He was not writing, or doing any work; for hours together he sat leaning his head on his hands, gazing intently at the lamp, which his mother had adjusted, until his eyes were dazzled, and the gloom of the room around became spotted with discs of shade. Was he to permit the natural gratification into which Tozer's success had reluctantly moved him, to alter his resolve? Was he to drop into his old harness and try again? or was he to carry out his purpose in the face of all entreaties and inducements? The natural incli-

nation to adopt the easiest course—and the equally natural, impetuous, youthful impulse to take the leap to which he had made up his mind, and dash forth in the face of his difficulties—gave him abundant occupation for his thoughts as they contended against each other. He sat arguing the question within himself long after his fire had sunk into ashes. When the penetrating cold of the night drove him at last to bed, the question was still dubious. Even in his sleep the uneasy perplexity pursued him;—a matter momentous enough, though nobody but Tozer—who was as restless as the minister, and disturbed his wife by groans and murmurs, of which, when indignantly woke up to render an account, he could give no explanation—knew or suspected anything. Whether to take up his anchors altogether and launch out upon that sea of life, of which, much as he had discussed it in his sermons, the young Nonconformist knew next to nothing? The widow would not have mused so quietly with her wakeful eyes in the dim room next to him, had she known what discussions were going on in Arthur's mind. As for the congregation of Salem, they slept soundly, with an exhilarating sensation of generosity and goodness,—all except the Pigeons, who were plotting schism, and had already in their eye a vacant Temperance Hall, where a new preaching station might be organised under the auspices of somebody who would rival Vincent. The

triumphant majority, however, laughed at the poulterer, and anticipated, with a pleasurable expectation, the meeting of next night, and the relief and delight of the pastor, who would find he had no explanations to make, but only his thanks to render to his generous flock. The good people concluded that they would all stop to shake hands with him after the business was over. "For it's as good as receiving of him again, and giving him the right hand of fellowship," said Mrs Brown at the Dairy, who was entirely won over to the minister's side. Only Tozer, groaning in his midnight visions, and disturbing the virtuous repose of his wedded partner, suspected the new cloud that hung over Salem. For before morning the minister's mind was finally made up.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE next day dawned amid the agitations natural to such a crisis of affairs. Almost before it was daylight, before Susan had woke, or the young stranger stirred upon her sofa, Miss Smith, troubled and exemplary, had returned to see after her charge. Miss Smith was in a state of much anxiety and discomfort till she had explained to Mrs Vincent all the strange circumstances in which she found herself; and the widow, who had ventured to rise from Susan's side, and had been noiselessly busy putting the room in order, that her child might see nothing that was not cheerful and orderly when she woke, was not without curiosity to hear, and gladly took this opportunity, before even Arthur was stirring, to understand, if she could, the story which was so connected with that of her children. She ventured to go into the next room with Miss Smith, where she could hear every movement in the sick-chamber. The widow found it hard to understand all

the tale. That Mrs Hilyard was Mildmay's wife, and that it was their child who had sought protection of all the world from Susan Vincent, whom the crimes of her father and mother had driven to the very verge of the grave, was so hard and difficult to comprehend, that all the governess's anxious details of how little Alice first came into her hands, of her mother's motives for concealing her from Colonel Mildmay, even of the ill-fated flight to Lonsdale, which, instead of keeping her safe, had carried the child into her father's very presence—and all the subsequent events which Miss Smith had already confided to the minister, fell but dully upon the ears of Susan's mother. "*Her* daughter —and *his* daughter—and she comes to take refuge with *my* child," said the widow, with a swelling heart. Mrs Vincent did not know what secret it was that lay heavy on the soul of the desperate woman who had followed her last night from Grove Street, but somehow, with a female instinct, felt, though she did not understand, that Mrs Hilyard or Mrs Mildmay, whatever her name might be, was as guilty in respect to Susan as was her guilty husband—the man who had stolen like a serpent into the Lonsdale cottage and won the poor girl's simple heart. Full of curiosity as she was, the widow's thoughts wandered off from Miss Smith's narrative; her heart swelled within her with an innocent triumph; the good had overcome the evil.

This child, over whom its father and mother had fought with so deadly a struggle, had flown for protection to Susan, whom that father and mother had done their utmost to ruin and destroy. They had not succeeded, thank God! Through the desert and the lions the widow's Una had come victorious, stretching her tender virgin shield over this poor child of passion and sorrow. While Miss Smith maundered through the entire history, starting from the time when Miss Russell married Colonel Mildmay, the widow's mind was entirely occupied with this wonderful victory of innocence over wickedness. She forgot the passionate despair of the mother whose child did not recognise her. She began immediately to contrive, with unguarded generosity, how Susan and she, when they left Carlingford, should carry the stranger along with them, and nurse her clouded mind into full development. Mrs Vincent's trials had not yet taught her any practical lessons of worldly wisdom. Her heart was still as open as when, unthinking of evil, she admitted the false Mr Fordham into her cottage, and made a beginning of all the misery which seemed now, to her sanguine heart, to be passing away. She went back to Susan's room full of this plan—full of tender thoughts towards the girl who had chosen Susan for her protector, and of pride and joy still more tender in her own child, who had overcome evil. It was, per-

haps, the sweetest solace which could have been offered, after all her troubles, to the minister's mother. It was at once a vindication of the hard "dealings" of Providence, and of that strength of innocence and purity, in which the little woman believed with all her heart.

The minister himself was much less agreeably moved when he found the governess in possession of his sitting-room. Anything more utterly vexatious could hardly have occurred to Vincent than to find this troubled good woman, herself much embarrassed and disturbed by her own position, seated at his breakfast-table on this eventful morning. Miss Smith was as primly uncomfortable as it was natural for an elderly single woman, still conscious of the fact that she was unmarried, to be, in an absolute *tête-à-tête* with a young man. She, poor lady, was as near blushing as her grey and composed non-complexion would permit. She moved uneasily in her seat, and made tremulous explanations, as Vincent, who was too young and inexperienced to be absolutely uncourteous, took his place opposite to her. "I am sure I feel quite an intruder," said poor Miss Smith; "but your mother, Mr Vincent, and little Alice—and indeed I did not know I was to be left here alone. It must seem so odd to you to find a lady—dear, dear me! I feel I am quite in the way," said the embarrassed governess; "but Mrs Mildmay will be here presently. I

know she will be here directly. I am sure she would have come with me had she known. But she sat up half the night hearing what I had to tell her, and dropped asleep just in the morning. She is wonderfully changed, Mr Vincent—very, very much changed. She is so nervous—a thing I never could have looked for. I suppose, after all, married ladies, however much they may object to their husbands, can't help feeling a little when anything happens," continued Miss Smith, primly; "and there is something so dreadful in such an accident. How do you think it can have happened? Could it be his groom, or who could it be? but I understand he is getting better now?"

"Yes, I believe so," said Vincent.

"I am so glad," said Miss Smith, "not that if it had been the will of Providence.—I would make the tea for you, Mr Vincent, if you would not think it odd, and I am sure Mrs Mildmay will be here directly. They were in a great commotion at Grange Lane. Just now, you know, there is an excitement. Though she is not a young girl, to be sure it is always natural. But for that I am sure they would all have come this morning; but perhaps Mr Fordham——"

"Not any tea, thank you. If you have breakfasted, I will have the things removed. I have only one sitting-room, you perceive," said the minister, rather bitterly. He could not be positively uncivil—his heart

was too young and fresh to be rude to any woman; but he rang the bell with a little unnecessary sharpness when Miss Smith protested that she had breakfasted long before. Her words excited him with a touch beyond telling. He could not, would not ask what was the cause of the commotion in Grange Lane; but he walked to the window to collect himself while the little maid cleared the table, and, throwing it open, looked out with the heart beating loud in his breast. Were these the bells of St Roque's chiming into the ruddy sunny air with a confused jangle of joy? It was a saint's day, no doubt—a festival which the perpetual curate took delight in proclaiming his observance of; or—if it might happen to be anything else, what was that to the minister of Salem, who had so many other things on his mind? As he looked out a cab drove rapidly up to the door—a cab from which he saw emerge Mrs Hilyard and another figure, which he recognised with a start of resentment. What possible right had this man to intrude upon him in this moment of fate? The minister left the window hastily, and stationed himself with a gloomy countenance on the hearthrug. He might be impatient of the women; but Fordham, inexcusable as his intrusion was, had to be met face to face. With a flash of sudden recollection, he recalled all his previous intercourse with the stranger whose name was so bitterly interwoven with

the history of the last six months. What had he ever done to wake so sharp a pang of dislike and injury in Vincent's mind? It was not for Susan's sake that her brother's heart closed and his countenance clouded against the man whose name had wrought her so much sorrow. Vincent had arrived at such a climax of personal existence that Susan had but a dim and secondary place in his thoughts. He was absorbed in his own troubles and plans and miseries. On the eve of striking out for himself into that bitter and unknown life in which his inexperienced imagination rejected the thought of any solace yet remaining, what malicious influence brought this man here?

They came in together into the room, "Mrs Mildmay and Mr Fordham"—not Mrs Hilyard: that was over; and, preoccupied as the minister was, he could not but perceive the sudden change which had come over the Back Grove Street needlewoman. Perhaps her despair had lasted as long as was possible for such an impatient spirit. She came in with the firm, steady step which he had observed long ago, before she had begun to tremble at his eye. Another new stage had commenced in her strange life. She went up to him without any hesitation, clear and decisive as of old.

"I am going away," she said, holding out her hand to him, "and so I presume are you, Mr Vincent. I have come to explain everything and see your mother.

Let me see your mother. Mr Fordham has come with me to explain to *you*. They think in Grange Lane that it is only a man who can speak to a man," she went on, with the old movement of her thin lips; "and that now I have come to life again, I must not manage my own affairs. I am going back to society and the world, Mr Vincent. I do not know where you are going, but here is somebody come to answer for me. Do they accept bail in a court of honour? or will you still hold a woman to her parole? for it must be settled now."

"Why must it be settled now?" said Vincent. He had dropped her hand and turned away from her with a certain repugnance. She had lost her power over him. At that moment the idea of being cruel, tyrannical to somebody—using his power harshly, balancing the pain in his own heart by inflicting pain on another—was not unagreeable to the minister's excited mind. He could have steeled himself just then to bring down upon her all the horrible penalties of the law. "Why must it be settled?" he repeated; "why must you leave Carlingford? I will not permit it." He spoke to her, but he looked at Fordham. The stranger was wrapped in a large overcoat which concealed all his dress. What was his dress, or his aspect, or the restrained brightness in his eyes to the minister of Salem? But Vincent watched him

narrowly with a jealous inspection. In Fordham's whole appearance there was the air of a man to whom something was about to happen, which aggravated to the fever-point the dislike and opposition in Vincent's heart.

"I will be answerable for Mrs Mildmay," said Fordham, with an evident response on his side to that opposition and dislike. Then he paused, evidently perceiving the necessity of conciliation. "Mr Vincent," he continued, with some earnestness, "we all understand and regret deeply the inconvenience—I mean the suffering—that is to say, the injury and misery which these late occurrences must have caused you. I know how well—that is, how generously, how nobly—you have behaved——"

Here Mr Fordham came to a pause in some confusion. To express calm acknowledgments to a man for his conduct in a matter which has been to him one of unmitigated disaster and calamity, requires an amount of composure which few people possess when at the height of personal happiness. The minister drew back, and, with a slight bow, and a restraint which was very natural and not unbecoming in his circumstances, looked on at the confusion of the speaker without any attempt to relieve it. He had offered seats to his visitors, but he himself stood on the hearthrug, dark and silent, giving no assistance

in the explanation. He had not invited the explanation—it must be managed now as the others might, without any help from him.

"I have seen Colonel Mildmay," continued Mr Fordham, after a confused pause. "If it can be any atonement to you to know how much he regrets all that has happened, so far as your family is concerned—how fully he exonerates Miss Vincent, who was all along deceived, and who would not have remained a moment with him had she not been forcibly detained. Mildmay declares she met with nothing but respect at his hands," continued the embarrassed advocate, lowering his voice; "he says——"

"Enough has been said on the subject," said Vincent, restraining himself with a violent effort.

"Yes—I beg your pardon, it is quite true—enough has been said," cried Fordham, with an appearance of relief. Here, at least, was one part of his difficult mediation over. "Mildmay will not," he resumed, after a pause, "tell me or any one else who it was that gave him his wound—that is a secret, he says, between him and his God—and another. Whoever that other may be," continued Fordham, with a quick look towards Mrs Mildmay, "he is conscious of having wronged—him—and will take no steps against—him. This culprit, it appears, must be permitted to escape—you think so?—worse evils might be involved if we

were to demand—his—punishment. Mr Vincent, I beg you to take this into consideration. It could be no advantage to you; the innocent shall not suffer—but—the criminal—must be permitted to escape."

"I do not see the necessity," said Vincent between his teeth.

"No, no," said Mrs Mildmay, suddenly. "Escape! who believes in escape? Mr Vincent knows better. Hush, you are a happy man just now—you are not qualified to judge; but *we* know better. Escape!—he means from prisons, and such like," she continued, turning to Vincent with a half-disdainful wave of her hand towards her companion. "But you know, and so do I, that there is no escape—not in this world. I know nothing about the next," said the strange woman, curbing once more the flush of excitement which had overpowered her as she spoke—"nothing; neither do you, though you are a priest. But there is enough of retribution here. The criminal—Mr Vincent—you know—will not escape."

She spoke these last words panting, with pauses between, for breath. She was afraid of him again; his blankness, his passive opposition, drove her out of her composure. She put her hands together under her shawl with a certain dumb entreaty, and fixed upon him her eager eyes. They were a strange group altogether. Miss Smith, who had still lingered at the

door, notwithstanding Mrs Mildmay's imperative gesture of dismissal—out of hearing, but not out of sight—suffered some little sound to escape her at this critical moment; and when her patroness turned round upon her with those dreadful eyes, fled with precipitation, taking refuge in Mrs Vincent's room. The table, still covered with its white cloth, stood between that dismayed spectator before she disappeared finally, and the little company who were engaged in this silent conflict. Beside it sat Mrs Mildmay, with a renewed panic of fear rising in her face. Fordham, considerably disturbed, and not knowing what to say, stood near her buttoning and unbuttoning his overcoat with impatient fingers, anxious to help her, but still more anxious to be gone. The minister stood facing them all, with compressed lips, and eyes which looked at nobody. He was wrapt in a silent dumb resistance to all entreaties and arguments, watching Fordham's gestures, Fordham's looks, with a jealous but secret suspicion. His heart was cruel in its bitterness. He for whom Providence had no joys in store, to whom the light was fading which made life sweet, was for this moment superior to the happy man who stood embarrassed and impatient before him; and generous as his real nature was, it was not in him, in this moment of darkness, to let the opportunity go.

"The innocent have suffered already," said Vincent, "all but madness, all but death. Why should the criminal escape?—go back into society, the society of good people, perhaps strike some one else more effectually? Why should I betray justice, and let the criminal escape? My sister's honour and safety are mine, and shall be guarded, whoever suffers. I will not permit her to go."

"But I offer to be answerable for her appearance," said Fordham, hastily. "I undertake to produce her if need be. You know me. I am a—a relation of the family. I am a man sufficiently known to satisfy any magistrate. You have no legal right to detain her. What would you have more? Is not my guarantee enough for you?"

"No," said Vincent, slowly. The two men stood defiant opposite to each other, contending for this woman, whom neither of them looked at, for whom neither of them cared. She, in the mean time, sat still in an agony of suspense and concealed anguish, with her eyes fixed on Vincent's face. She knew very well it was not of her that either of the two was thinking; yet it was her fate, perhaps her very life, which hung trembling in the balance. A smothered sighing sob came from her breast. She was silenced for the first time in her life. She had escaped her crime; but all its material consequences, shame and punishment, still

hung over her head. After God himself had freed her from the guilt of blood—after the injured man himself had forgiven her—when all was clear for her escape into another life—was this an indignant angel, with flaming sword and averted face, that barred the way of the fugitive? Beyond him, virtue and goodness, and all the fruits of repentance, shone before the eyes which had up to this time seen but little attraction in them—all so sweet, so easy, so certain, if but she were free. Her worn heart sighed to get forth into that way of peace. She could have fallen on her knees before the stern judge who kept her back, and held over her head the cloud of her own ill-doings, but dared not, in her paroxysm of fear and half-despair. A groaning, sighing sob, interrupted and broken, came from her exhausted breast. Just as she had recovered herself—as she had escaped—as remorse and misery had driven her to yearn after a better life, to be cast down again into this abyss of guilt and punishment! She trembled violently as she clasped her poor hands under her shawl. Composure and self-restraint were impossible in this terrible suspense.

Her cry went to Fordham's heart; and, besides, he was in desperate haste, and could afford to sink his pride, and make an appeal for once. He made a step forward, and put out his hand with an entreating gesture. "Do you hear her?" he cried, suddenly. "You

have had much to bear yourself; have pity on *her*. Let her off—leave her to God. She has been ill, and will die if you have no mercy. You who are a minister——"

In his energy his overcoat fell back for a moment; underneath he was in full dress, which showed strangely in that grey spring morning. Vincent turned round upon him with a smile. The young man's face was utterly pale, white to the lips. The bells were jangling joy in his ears. He was not master of himself. "We detain you, Mr Fordham; you have other affairs in hand," he said. "I am a minister only—a Dissenting minister—unworthy to have such an intercessor pleading with me; but you, at least," cried poor Vincent, with an attempt at sarcasm, "do not want my pity; there is nothing between us that requires explanation. I will arrange with Mrs Mildmay alone." He turned away and went to the window when he had spoken. There he stood, with his back to them, listening to the bells of St Roque's, as they came and went in irregular breaks upon the wind. His heart was bursting with wild throbs of bitterness and despair; it was all he could do to keep the tumult down, and contain himself in that flush of passion. He turned away from them, and stood gazing out at that tedious window into the blank world. What did it matter? Let her escape if she would—let things go as they

might; nothing was of any further importance—certainly on earth—perhaps even in heaven.

"I will go away—I can do you no good—I should only lose my temper; and time presses," said Mr Fordham, with a flush of resentment on his face, as he turned to the anxious woman behind him. What could he do? He could not quarrel with this angry man in his own house on such a day. He could not keep happier matters waiting. He would not risk the losing of his temper and his time at this moment of all others. He went away with a sensation of defeat, which for half an hour materially mitigated his happiness. But he *was* happy, and the happy are indulgent judges both of their own conduct and of others. As for the minister, he was roused again when he saw his rival jump into the cab at the door, and drive off alone down the street, which was lively with the early stir of day. The sun had just broken through the morning clouds, and it was into a ruddy perspective of light that the stranger disappeared as he went off towards Grange Lane. Strange contrast of fate! While Fordham hastened down into the sunshine to all the joy that awaited him there, Tozer, a homely, matter-of-fact figure in the ruddy light, was crossing the street towards the minister's door. Vincent went away from the window again, with pangs of an impatience and intolerance of his own lot which no strength of mind

could subdue. All the gleams of impossible joy which had lighted his path in Carlingford had now gone out, and left him in darkness; and here came back, in undisturbed possession, all the meaner circumstances of his individual destiny. Salem alone remained to him out of the wreck of his dreams; except when he turned back and discovered *her*—the one tragic thread in the petty history—this woman whose future life for good or for evil he held in his avenging hands.

Mrs Mildmay was still seated by the table. She had regained command of herself. She looked up to him with gleaming eyes when he approached her. "Mr Vincent, I keep my parole—I am waiting your pleasure," she said, never removing her eyes from his face. It was at this moment that Mrs Vincent, who had from the window of Susan's chamber seen the cab arrive and go away with some curiosity, came into the room. The widow wanted to know who her son's visitors were, and what had brought them. She came in with a little eagerness, but was brought to a sudden standstill by the appearance of Mrs Mildmay. Why was this woman here? what had she to do with the minister? Mrs Vincent put on her little air of simple dignity. She said, "I beg your pardon; I did not know my son was engaged," with a curtsy of disapproving politeness to the unwelcome visitor. With a troubled look at Arthur, who looked excited and

gloomy enough to justify any uncomfortable imaginations about him, his mother turned away somewhat reluctantly. She did not feel that it was quite right to leave him exposed to the wiles of this "designing woman;" but the widow's own dignity was partly at stake. All along she had disapproved of this strange friendship, and she could not countenance it now.

"Your mother is going away," said Mrs Mildmay, with a restrained outcry of despair: "is no one to be permitted to mediate between us? You are a man and cruel; you are in trouble, and you think you will avenge yourself. No, no—I don't mean what I say. Your son is a—a true knight, Mrs Vincent; I told you so before. He will never be hard upon a woman: if I had not known that, why should I have trusted him? I came back, as he knows, of my own will. Don't go away; I am willing you should know—the whole," said the excited woman, with a sudden pause, turning upon Vincent, her face blanching into deadly whiteness—"the whole—I consent; let her be the judge. Women are more cruel than men; but I saved her daughter—I am willing that she should hear it all."

She sat down again on the seat from which she had risen. A certain comfort and relief stole over her face. She was appealing to the general heart of humanity against this one man who knew her secret. It might be hard to hear the story of her own sin—but it

was harder to be under the stifling sway of one who knew it, and who had it in his power to denounce her. She ceased to tremble as she looked at the widow's troubled face. It was a new tribunal before which she stood; perhaps here her provocations might be acknowledged — her soul acquitted of the burden from which it could never escape. As the slow moments passed on, and the minister did not speak, she grew impatient of the silence. "Tell her," she said, faintly—it was a new hope which thus awoke in her heart.

But while Mrs Mildmay sat waiting, and while the widow drew near, not without some judicial state in the poise of her little figure, to hear the explanation which she felt she was entitled to, Tozer's honest troubled face looked in at the door. It put a climax upon the confusion of the morning. The good butterman looked on in some surprise at this strange assemblage, recognising dimly the haze of an excitement of which he knew nothing. He was acquainted, to some extent, with the needlewoman of Back Grove Street. He had gone to call on her once at the solicitation of the anxious Brown, who had charge of her district but did not feel himself competent to deal with the spiritual necessities of such a penitent; and Tozer remembered well that her state of mind had not been satisfactory— "not what was to be looked for in a person as had the

means of grace close at hand, and attended regular at Salem." He thought she must have come at this unlucky moment to get assistance of some kind from the minister—"as if he had not troubles enough of his own," Tozer said to himself; but the deacon was not disposed to let his pastor be victimised in any such fashion. This, at least, was a matter in which he felt fully entitled to interfere.

"Good mornin', ma'am," said the worthy butterman; "good mornin', Mr Vincent—it's cold, but it's seasonable for the time of year. What I wanted was a word or two with the pastor, ma'am, if he's disengaged. It ain't what I approve," continued Tozer, fixing his eyes with some sternness upon the visitor, "to take up a minister's time in the morning when he has the work of a flock on his hands. My business, being such as can't wait, is different; but them as are in want of assistance, one way or another, which is a thing as belongs to the deacons, have no excuse, not as I can see, for disturbing the pastor. It ain't a thing as I would put up with," continued Tozer, with increasing severity; "the charities of the flock ain't in Mr Vincent's hands; it's a swindling of his time to come in upon him of a morning if there ain't a good reason; and, as far as I am concerned, it would be enough to shut my heart up again' giving help—that's how it would work on me."

Mrs Mildmay was entirely inattentive to the first few words of this address, but the pointed application given by the speaker's eyes called her attention presently. She gazed at him, as he proceeded, with a gradual lightening of her worn and anxious face. While Mrs Vincent did all she could, with anxious looks and little deprecatory gestures, to stop the butterman, the countenance of her visitor cleared by one of those strange sudden changes which the minister had noted so often. Her lips relaxed, her eyes gleamed with a sudden flash of amusement. Then she glanced around, seeing with quick observation not only the absurdity of Tozer's mistake, but the infallible effect it had in changing the aspect of affairs. The minister had turned away, not without a grim, impatient smile at the corner of his mouth. The minister's mother, shocked in all her gentle politeness, was eagerly watching her opportunity to break in and set the perplexed deacon right. The culprit, who had been on her trial a moment before, drew a long breath of utter relief. Now she had escaped — the crisis was over. Her quick spirit rose with a sense of triumph—a sensation of amusement. She entered eagerly into it, leaning forward with eyes that shone and gleamed upon her accuser, and a mock solemnity of attention which only her desperate strain of mind and faculties could have enabled her to assume so quickly. When the butter-

man came to a pause, Mrs Vincent rushed in breathlessly to the rescue.

"Mr Tozer—Mr Tozer! this lady is—a—a friend of ours," cried the minister's mother, with looks that were much more eloquent of her distress and horror than any words. She had no time to say more, when the aggrieved individual herself broke in—

"Mr Tozer knows I have been one of the flock since ever Mr Vincent came," said the strange woman. "I have gone to all the meetings, and listened faithfully to the pastor every time he has preached; and would you judge me unworthy of relief because I once came to see him in a morning? That is hard laws; but the minister will speak for me. The minister knows me," she went on, turning to Vincent, "and he and his mother have been very charitable to a poor woman, Mr Tozer. You will not exclude me from the Salem charities for this one offence? Remember that I am a member of the flock."

"Not a church-member as I know," said the sturdy deacon—"not meaning no offence, if I've made a mistake—one sitting, as far as I remember; but a—lady—as is a friend of Mrs Vincent's——"

Here Tozer paused, abashed but suspicious, not disposed to make any further apology. That moment was enough to drive this lighter interlude from the vigilant soul which, in all its moods, watched what was

going on with a quick apprehension of the opportunities of the moment. All her perceptions, quickened as they were by anxiety and fear, were bent on discovering an outlet for her escape, and she saw her chance now. She got up wearily, leaning on the table, as indeed she needed to lean, and looked into Mrs Vincent's face: "May I see my child?" she said, in a voice that went to the heart of the widow. The minister's mother could not resist this appeal. She saw the trembling in her limbs, the anxiety in her eye. "Arthur, I will see to Mrs Mildmay. Mr Tozer has something to say to you, and we must not occupy your time," said the tender little woman, in whose gentle presence there was protection and shelter even for the passionate spirit beside her. Thus the two went away together. If there had ever been any revengeful intention in Vincent's mind, it had disappeared by this time. He too breathed deep with relief. The criminal had escaped, at least out of his hands. He was no longer compelled to take upon himself the office of an avenger.

CHAPTER XL.

"I HOPE, sir, as I haven't said anything to give offence?—it was far from my meaning," said Tozer; "not as the—person—is a church-member, being only a seat-holder for one sittin', as is down in the books. I wouldn't have come over, not so early, Mr Vincent, if it wasn't as I was wishful to try if you'd listen to reason about the meetin' as is appointed to be to-night. It ain't no interest of mine, not so far as money goes, nor nothing of that kind. It's you as I'm a-thinking of. I don't mind standing the expense out of my own pocket, if so be as you'd give in to make it a tea-meetin'. I don't know as you'd need to do nothing but take the chair and make yourself agreeable. Me and Brown and the women would manage the rest. It would be a pleasant surprise, that's what it would be," said the good butterman; "and Phœbe and some more would go down directly to make ready: and I don't doubt as there's cakes and buns enough in

Carlingford, Mr Vincent, sir, if you'd but bend your mind to it and consent."

"I am going out," said Vincent; "I have—something to do; don't detain me, Tozer. I must have this morning to myself."

"I'll walk with you, sir, if I ain't in the way," said the deacon, accompanying the young man's restless steps down-stairs. "They tell me Miss is a deal better, and all things is going on well. I wouldn't be meddlesome, Mr Vincent, not of my own will; but when matters is settling, sir, if you'd but hear reason! There can't nothing but harm come of more explanations. I never had no confidence in explanations, for my part; but pleasant looks and the urns a-smoking, and a bit of green on the wall, as Phœbe and the rest could put up in no time! and just a speech as was agreeable to wind up with—a bit of an anecdote, or poetry about friends as is better friends after they've spoke their minds and had it out—that's the thing as would settle Salem, Mr Vincent. I don't speak, not to bother you, sir, but for your good. There ain't no difficulty in it; it's easier a deal than being serious and opening up all things over again; and as for them as would like to dictate——"

"I am not thinking of Salem," said the minister; "I have many other things to distract me; for heaven's sake, if you have any pity, leave me alone to-day."

"But you'll give in to make it a tea-meetin'?" said the anxious butterman, pausing at his own door.

Tozer did not make out the minister's reply. It is difficult to distinguish between a nod and a shake of the head, under some circumstances—and Vincent did not pause to give an articulate answer, but left his champion to his own devices. It seemed to Vincent to be a long time since Fordham left his house—and he was possessed with a fever of impatience to see for himself what was being transacted down yonder in the sunshine, where the spire of St Roque's appeared in the distance through the ruddy morning haze. The bells had ceased, and all was quiet enough in Grange Lane. Quite quiet—a few ordinary passengers in the tranquil road, nursemaids and children—and the calm green doors closing in the concealed houses, as if no passion or agitation could penetrate them. The door of Lady Western's garden was ajar. The minister crossed over and looked in with a wistful, despairing hope of seeing something that would contradict his conclusion. The house was basking in the spring sunshine—the door open, some of the windows open, eager servants hovering about, an air of expectation over all. With eyes full of memories, the minister looked in at the half-open door, which one time and another had been to him the gate of paradise. Within, where the red geraniums and verbenas had once brightened all the

borders, were pale crocuses and flowers of early spring —the limes were beginning to bud, the daisies to grow among the grass. The winter was over in that sheltered and sunny place; Nature herself stood sweet within the protecting walls, and gathered all the tenderest sweets of spring to greet the bride in the new beginning of her life. It was but a glance, but the spectator, in the bitterness of his heart, did not lose a single tint or line; and just then the joy-bells burst out once more from St Roque's. Poor Vincent drew back from the door as the sudden sound stung him to the heart. Nothing had any pity for him—all the world, and every voice and breath therein, sided with the others in their joy. He went on blindly, without thinking where he was going, with a kind of dull, stubborn determination in his heart, not to turn back in his wretchedness even from the sight of the happy procession which he knew must be advancing to meet him. A pang more or less, what did it matter? And for the last time he would look on Her who was nothing in the world to him now—who never could have been anything—yet who had somehow shed such streams of light upon the poor minister's humble path, as no reality in all his life had ever shed before. He paused on the edge of the road as he saw the carriage coming. It was one of those moments when a man's

entire life becomes apparent to him in long perspective of past and future, he himself and all the world standing still between. The bells rang on his heart, with echoes from the wheels and the horses' feet coming up in superb pride and triumph. Heaven and earth were glad for her in her joy. He, in his great trouble, stood dark in the sunshine and looked on.

It was only a moment, and no more. He would have seen nothing but the white mist of the veil which surrounded her, had not she in her loveliness and kindness perceived him, and bent forward in the carriage with a little motion of her hand calling the attention of her unseen bridegroom to that figure on the way. At sight of that movement, the unhappy young man started with an intolerable pang, and went on heedless where he was going. He could not control the momentary passion. She had never harmed him—never meant to dazzle him with her beauty, or trifle with his love, or break his heart. It was kind as the sunshine, this sweet bridal face leaning out with that momentary glance of recognition. She would have given him her kind hand, her sweet smile as of old, had they met more closely—no remorseful consciousness was in *her* eyes; but neither the bells, nor the flowers, nor the sunshine, went with such a pang to poor Vincent's heart as did that look of kindness. It

was all unreal then—no foundation at all in it? not enough to call a passing colour to her cheek, or to dim her sweet eyes on her bridal day? He went down the long road in the insensibility of passion—seeing nothing, caring for nothing—stung to the heart. No look of triumph, no female dart of conscious cruelty, could have given the poor minister so bitter a wound. All her treasured looks and smiles—the touch of her hand—her words, of which he had scarcely forgotten one—did they mean nothing after all? nothing but kindness? He had laid his heart at her feet; if she had trodden on it he could have forgiven her; but she only went on smiling, and never saw the treasure in her way. And this was the end. The unfortunate young man could not give way to any outbreak of the passion that consumed him; he could but go on hotly—on past St Roque's, where flowers still lay in the porch, and the open doors invited strangers, to the silent country, where the fields lay callow under the touch of spring. Spring! everlasting mockery of human trouble! Here were the hedgerows stirring, the secret grain beginning to throb conscious in the old furrows; but life itself standing still—coming to a sudden end in this heart which filled the young man's entire frame with pulsations of anguish. All his existence had flowed towards this day, and took its termination here. His

love—heaven help him! he had but one heart, and had thrown it away; his work—that too was to come to nothing, and be ended; all his traditions, all his hopes, were they to be buried in one grave? and what was to become after of the posthumous and nameless life?

CHAPTER XLI.

When the minister fully came to himself, it was after a long rapid walk of many miles through the silent fields and hazy country. There the clouds cleared off from him in the quietness. When he began to see clearly he turned back towards Carlingford. Nothing now stood between him and the crisis which henceforward must determine his personal affairs. He turned in the long country road, which he had been pursuing eagerly without knowing what he was doing, and gazed back towards the distant roofs. His heart ached and throbbed with the pangs that were past. He had a consciousness that it stirred within his breast, still smarting and thrilling with that violent access of agony—but the climax was over. The strong pulsations fell into dull beats of indefinite pain. Now for the other world—the neutral-coloured life. Vincent did not very well know which road he had taken, for he had not been thinking of where he was going; but it

roused him a little to perceive that his homeward way brought him through Grove Street, and past Siloam Cottage, where Mr Tufton lived.

Mrs Tufton was at the window, behind the great geranium, when the minister came in sight. When she saw him she tapped upon the pane and beckoned him to go in. He obeyed the summons, almost without impatience, in the languor of his mind. He went in to find them all by the fire, just as they had been when he came first to Carlingford. The old minister, in his arm-chair, holding out his flabby white hand to his dear young brother; the invalid daughter still knitting, with cold blue eyes, always vigilant and alert, investigating everything. It was a mild day, and Mrs Tufton herself had shifted her seat to the window, where she had been reading aloud as usual the 'Carlingford Gazette.' The motionless warm air of the little parlour, the prints of the brethren on the walls, the attitudes of the living inhabitants, were all unchanged from the time when the young minister of Salem paid his first visit, and chafed at Mr Tufton's advice, and heard with a secret shiver the prophecy of Adelaide, that "they would kill him in six months." He took the same chair, again making a little commotion among the furniture, which the size of the room made it difficult to displace. It was with a bewildering sensation that he sat down in that unchangeable house.

Had time really gone on through all these passions and pains, of which he was conscious in his heart? or had it stood still, and were they only dreams? Adelaide Tufton, immovable in her padded chair, with pale blue eyes that searched through everything, had surely never once altered her position, but had knitted away the days with a mystic thread like one of the Fates. Even the geranium did not seem to have gained or shed a single leaf.

"I have just been reading in the 'Gazette' the report of last night's meeting," said good Mrs Tufton. "Oh, Mr Vincent, I was so glad—your dear mother herself, if she had been there, could not have been happier than I was. I hope she has seen the 'Gazette' this morning. You young men always like the 'Times;' but they never put in anything that is interesting to me in the 'Times.' Perhaps, if she has not seen it, you will put the paper in your pocket. Indeed, it made me as happy as if you had been my own son. I always say that is very much how Mr Tufton and I feel for you."

"Yes, it went off very well," said the old minister. "My dear young brother, it all depends on whether you have friends that know how to deal with a flock; nothing can teach you that but experience. I am sorry I dare not go out again to-night—it cost me my night's rest last night, as Mrs Tufton will tell you; but that

is nothing in consideration of duty. Never think of ease to yourself, my dear young friend, when you can serve a brother; it has always been my rule through life——"

"Mr Vincent understands all that," said Adelaide; "that will do, papa—we know. Tell me about Lady Western's marriage, Mr Vincent. I daresay you were invited, as she was such a friend of yours. It must have made an awkwardness between you when she turned out to be Colonel Mildmay's sister; but, to be sure, those things don't matter among people in high life. It was delightful that she should marry her old love after all, don't you think? Poor Sir Joseph would have left a different will if he had known. Parted for ten years and coming together again! it is like a story in a book——"

"I do not know the circumstances," said poor Vincent. He turned to Mr Tufton with a vain hope of escaping. "I shall have to bid you good-bye shortly," said the minister; "though it was very good of the Salem people not to dismiss me, I prefer——"

"You mean to go away?" said Adelaide; "that will be a wonderful piece of news in the connection; but I don't think you will go away: there will be a deputation, and they will give you a piece of plate, and you will remain—you will not be able to resist. Papa never was a preacher to speak of," continued the daunt-

less invalid, "but they gave him a purse and a testimonial when he retired; and you are soft-hearted, and they will get the better of you——"

"Adelaide!" said Mrs Tufton, "Mr Vincent will think you out of your senses: indeed, Mr Vincent, she does not mind what she says; and she has had so much ill-health, poor child, that both her papa and I have given in to her too much; but as for my husband's preaching, it is well known he could have had many other charges if his duty had not called him to stay at Salem; invitations used to come——"

"Oh, stuff!" said the irreverent Adelaide—"as if Mr Vincent did not know. But I will tell you about Lady Western—that is the romance of the day. Mr Fordham was very poor, you know, when they first saw each other—only a poor barrister—and the friends interfered. Friends always interfere," said the sick woman, fixing her pale eyes on Vincent's face as she went on with her knitting; "and they married her to old Sir Joseph Western; and so, after a while, she became the young dowager. She must have been very pretty then—she is beautiful now; but I would not have married a widow, had I been Mr Fordham, after I came into my fortune. His elder brother died, you know. I would not have married her, however lovely she had been. Mr Vincent, would you?"

"Adelaide!" cried Mrs Tufton, again in dismay.

The poor minister thrust back his chair from the table, and came roughly against the stand of the great geranium, which had to be adjusted, and covered his retreat. He glanced at his conscious tormentor with the contemptuous rage and aggravation which men sometimes feel towards a weak creature who insults them with impunity. But she did not show any pleasurable consciousness of her triumph ; she kept knitting on, looking at him with her pale blue eyes. There was something in that loveless eagerness of curiosity which appalled Vincent. He got up hastily to his feet, and said he had something to do and must go away.

"Good-bye, my dear brother," said Mr Tufton slowly, shaking the young minister's hand ; "you will be judicious to-night ? The flock have stood by you, and been indulgent to your inexperience. They see you never meant to hurt any of their feelings. It is what I always trained my dear people to be—considerate to the young preachers. Take my advice, my beloved young brother, and dear Tozer's advice. We do all we can for you here, and dear Tozer is a tower of strength. And you have our prayers ; we are but a little assembly—I and my dear partner in life and our afflicted child—but two or three, you know—and we never forget you at the throne of grace."

With this parting blessing Vincent hastened away.

Poor little Mrs Tufton had added some little effusion of motherly kindness which he did not listen to. He came away with a strange impression on his mind of that knitting woman, pale and curious, in her padded chair. Adelaide Tufton was not old—not a great many years older than himself. To him, with the life beating so strong in his veins, the sight of that life in death was strange, almost awful. The despair, the anguish, the vivid uncertainty and reality of his own existence, appeared to him in wonderful relief against that motionless background. If he came back here ten years hence, he might still find as now the old man by the fire, the pale woman knitting in her chair, as they had been for these six months which had brought to the young minister a greater crowd of events than all his previous years. When he thought of that helpless woman, with her lively thoughts and curious eyes, always busy and speculating about the life from which she was utterly shut out, a strange sensation of thankfulness stole over the young man; though he was miserable he was alive. Between him and the lovely figure on which his heart had dwelt too long, rose up now this other figure which was not lovely. He grew stronger as he went home along the streets in the changed light of the afternoon. Siloam Cottage interposed between him and that ineffable moment at the bridal doors; presently Salem too would interpose,

and all the difficulties and troubles of his career. He had taken up life again, after that pause when the sun and the moon stood still and the battle raged. Now it was all over, and the world's course had begun anew.

Mrs Vincent was looking out for him when he reached his own door. He could see her disappear from the window above, where she had been standing watching. She came to meet him as he went up to the sitting-room. There was nobody now in that room, where the widow had been making everything smile for her son. The table was spread; the fire bright; the lamp ready to be lighted on the table. Mrs Vincent had been alarmed by Arthur's long absence, but she did not say so. She only made haste to tell him that Susan was so much better, and that the doctor was in such high spirits about her. "After we come back from the meeting you are to go in and sit with your sister for an hour, my dear boy," said his mother. "Till that was over, we knew your mind would be occupied, and Susan would like to see you. Oh, Arthur! it will make you happy only to look at her. She remembers everything now; she has asked me even all about the flock, and cried with joy to hear how things had gone off last night—not for joy only," said the truthful widow, "with indignation, too, that you ever should have been doubted—for Susan thinks there is nobody like her brother; but, my dear, we

ought to be very thankful that things have happened so well. Everybody must learn to put up with a little injustice in this world, particularly the pastor of a flock. If you will go and get ready for dinner, Arthur," said Mrs Vincent, "I will light the lamp. I have taken it into my own hands, dear; it is better to put it right at first than to be always arranging it after it has been put wrong. Dinner is quite ready; and make haste, my dear boy. I have got a little fish for you, and you know it will spoil if you keep it waiting; and I have so much to tell you before we go out to the meeting to-night."

Vincent made no answer to the wistful inquiring look which his mother turned to his face as she mentioned this meeting. He went away with an impatient exclamation about that lamp, which seemed to him to occupy half her thoughts. Mrs Vincent was full of many cares and much news which she had to give her son; she was also deeply anxious and curious to know what he was going to do that night; but still she spared a little time for the lamp, to set the screw right, and light to a delicate evenness the well-trimmed wick. When she had placed it on the table, it gave her a certain satisfaction to see how clearly it burned, and how bright it made the table. "If I only knew what Arthur was going to do," she said to herself, with a little sigh, as she rang the bell for the dinner, and

warned the little maid to be very careful with the fish; "for if it is not put very nicely on the table Mr Vincent will not have any of it," said the minister's mother, with that feminine mingling of small cares and great which was so incomprehensible to her son. When he came back and seated himself listlessly at the table, he never thought of observing the light, or taking note of the brightness of the room. To think of this business of dinner at all, interjected into such a day, was almost too much for Arthur; and he was half disgusted with himself when he found that, after all, he could eat, and that not only for his mother's sake. Mrs Vincent talked only of Susan while the little maid was going and coming into the room; but when they were alone she drew her chair a little nearer and entered upon other things.

"Arthur, I had a great deal of conversation with Mrs Mildmay; she told me—everything," said the widow, growing pale. "Oh, my dear! when God leaves us alone to our own devices, what dreadful things a sinful creature may do! I said you would do nothing to harm her now when Susan was safe. Hush, dear! we must never breathe a word of it to Susan, or any one. Susan is changed, Arthur; sometimes I am glad of it, sometimes I could cry. She is not an innocent girl now. She is a woman—oh, Arthur! a great deal stronger than her mother; she would clear herself

somehow if she knew; she would not bear that suspicion. She is more like your dear papa," said the mother, wiping her eyes, "than I ever thought to see one of my children. I can see his high-minded ways in her, Arthur—and steadier than you and me; for you have my quick temper, dear. Wait just another moment, Arthur. This poor child dotes upon Susan; and her mother asked me," said poor Mrs Vincent, pausing, and looking her son in the face, "if—I would keep her with me."

"Keep her with *you!* Let us be rid of them," cried the minister; "they have brought us nothing but misery ever since we heard their names."

"Yes, Arthur dear; but the poor child never did any one any harm. They have made her a ward in Chancery now. It should have been done long ago but for the wickedness and the disputes; and, my dear boy," said Mrs Vincent, anxiously, "I will have to leave Lonsdale, you know; my poor child could not go back there; and we will not stay with you in Carlingford to get you into trouble with your flock," continued the widow, gazing wistfully in his face to see if she could gather anything of his purpose from his looks; "and with my little income, you know, it would be hard work without coming on you; but all the difficulty is cleared away if we take this child. I was thinking I might take Susan abroad," said the widow,

with a little sigh ; "it is the best thing, I have always heard, after such trouble ; and it would be an occupation for her when she got better. My dear boy, don't be hasty ; your dear father always took a little time to think upon a thing before he would speak ; but you have always had my temper, Arthur. I won't say any more ; we will speak of it, dear, in your sister's room, when we come home from the meeting to-night."

"I think you had better not go to the meeting to-night ; there will be nothing said to please you, mother," said the minister, rising from the table, and taking his favourite position on the hearthrug. His mother turned round frightened, but afraid to show her fright, determined still to look as if she believed everything was going well.

"No fine speeches, Arthur? My dear boy, I always like to hear you speak. I know you will say what you ought," said the widow, smiling, with a patient determination in her face. Then there was a pause. "Perhaps you will give me a little sketch of what you are going to say," she went on, with a tender artifice, concealing her anxiety. "Your dear papa often did, Arthur, when anything was going on among the flock."

But Arthur made no reply. His clouded face filled his mother with a host of indefinite fears. But she saw, as she had seen so often, that womanish entreaties were not practicable, and that he must be left to him-

self. "He will tell me as we go to Salem," she said in her heart, to quiet its anxious throbbing. "Perhaps you would like to have the room to yourself a little, dear," she said aloud. "I will go to Susan till it is time to leave; and I know my Arthur will ask the counsel of God," she added softly, just touching his hand with a tender momentary clasp. It was all the minister could do to resist the look of anxious inquiry with which this little caress was accompanied; and then she left him to prepare for his meeting. Whether he asked advice or not of his Father in heaven, the widow asked it for him with tears in her anxious eyes. She had done all that she could do. When the minister was left to himself, he opened his desk and took out the manuscript with which he had been busy last night. It was the speech he had intended to deliver, and he had been pleased with it. He sat down now and read it over to himself, by the white-covered table, on which his mother's lamp burned bright. Sheet by sheet, as he read it over, the impatient young man tossed into the fire, with hasty exclamations of disgust. He was excited; his mind was in fiery action; his heart moved to the depths. No turgid Homerton eloquence would do now. What he said must be not from the lips, but from the heart.

CHAPTER XLII.

Mrs Vincent was ready in very good time for the meeting; she brought her son a cup of coffee with her own hand when she was dressed in her bonnet and shawl. She had put on her best bonnet—her newest black silk dress. Perhaps she knew that device of Tozer's, of which the minister yet was not aware; but Arthur for once was too peremptory and decided for his mother. She who knew how to yield when resistance was impossible, had to give in to him at last. It was better to stay at home, anxious as her heart was, than to exasperate her boy, who had so many other things to trouble him. With much heroism the widow took off her bonnet again and returned to Susan's room. There could be little doubt now what the minister was going to do. While she seated herself once more by her daughter's bedside, in a patience which was all but unbearable, her son went alone to his last meeting with his flock. He walked rapidly

through Grove Street, going through the stream of Salem people, who were moving in twos and threes in the same direction. A little excitement had sprung up in Carlingford on the occasion. The public in general had begun to find out, as the public generally does, that here was a man who was apt to make disclosures not only of his opinions but of himself wherever he appeared, and that a chance was hereby afforded to the common eye of seeing that curious phenomenon, a human spirit in action—a human heart as it throbbed and changed—a sight more interesting than any other dramatic performance under heaven. There was an unusual throng that night in Grove Street, and the audience was not less amazed than the minister when they found what awaited them in the Salem schoolroom. There Phœbe Tozer and her sister-spirits had been busy all day. Again there were evergreen wreaths on the walls, and the stiff iron gaslights were bristling with holly. Phœbe's genius had even gone further than on the last great occasion, for there were pink and white roses among the green leaves, and one of the texts which hung on the wall had been temporarily elevated over the platform, framed in wreaths and supported by extempore fastenings, the doubtful security of which filled Phœbe's artless soul with many a pang of terror. It was the tender injunction, "Love one another," which had been elevated to this post of

honour, and this was the first thing which met Vincent's eye as he entered the room. Underneath, the platform table was already filled with the *elite* of the flock. The ladies were all in their best bonnets in that favoured circle, and Tozer stood glorious in his Sunday attire—but in his own mind privately a little anxious as to the effect of all this upon the sensitive mind of the minister—by the side of the empty chair which had been left for the president of the assembly. When Vincent was seen to enter, it was Tozer who gave the signal for a burst of cheering, which the pleased assembly, newly aware of the treat thus provided for it, performed heartily with all its boots and umbrellas. Through this applause the minister made his way to the platform with abstracted looks. The cheer made no difference upon the stubborn displeasure and annoyance of his face. Nothing that could possibly have been done to aggravate his impatient spirit and make his resolve unalterable, could have been more entirely successful than poor Tozer's expedient for the conciliation of the flock. Angry, displeased, humbled in his own estimation, the unfortunate pastor made his way through the people, who were all smiles and conscious favour. A curt general bow and cold courtesy was all he had even for his friends on the platform, who beamed upon him as he advanced. He was not mollified by the universal applause; he was

not to be moved to complaisance by any such argument. He would not take the chair, though Tozer, with anxious officiousness, put it ready for him, and Phœbe looked up with looks of entreaty from behind the urn. In the sight of all the people he refused the honour, and sat down on a little supernumerary seat behind, where he was not visible to the increasing crowd. This refusal sent a thrill through all the anxious deacons on the platform. They gathered round him to make remonstrances, to which the minister paid no regard. It was a dreadful moment. Nobody knew what to do in the emergency. The throng streamed in till there was no longer an inch of standing-ground, nor a single seat vacant, except that one empty chair which perplexed the assembly. The urns began to smoke less hotly ; the crowd gave murmurous indications of impatience as the deacons cogitated —What was to be done?—the tea at least must not be permitted to get cold. At last Mr Brown stood up and proposed feebly, that as Mr Vincent did not wish to preside, Mr Tozer should be chairman on this joyful occasion. The Salem folks, who thought it a pity to neglect the good things before them, assented with some perplexity, and then the business of the evening began.

It was very lively business for the first half-hour. Poor Mrs Tufton, who was seated immediately in front

of the minister, disturbed by his impatient movements, took fright for the young man; and could not but wonder in herself how people managed to eat cake and drink tea in such an impromptu fashion, who doubtless had partaken of that meal before leaving home, as she justly reflected. The old minister's wife stood by the young minister with a natural *esprit de corps*, and was more anxious than she could account for. A certain cloud subdued the hilarity of the table altogether; everybody was aware of the dark visage of the minister, indignant and annoyed, behind. A certain hush was upon the talk, and Tozer himself had grown pale in the chair, where the good butterman by no means enjoyed his dignity. Tozer was not so eloquent as usual when he got up to speak. He told the refreshed and exhilarated flock that he had made bold to give them a little treat, out of his own head, seeing that everything had gone off satisfactory last night; and they would agree with him as the minister had no call to take no further trouble in the way of explanations. A storm of applause was the response of the Salem folks to this suggestion; they were in the highest good-humour both with themselves and the minister—ready to vote him a silver tea-service on the spot, if anybody had been prompt enough to suggest it. But a certain awe stole over even that delighted assembly when Mr Vincent came forward to the front of the table and

confronted them all, turning his back upon his loyal supporters. They did not know what to make of the dark aspect and clouded face of the pastor, relieved as it was against the alarmed and anxious countenances behind him. A panic seized upon Salem: something which they had not anticipated—something very different from the programme—was in the minister's eye.

The Pigeons were in a back seat—very far back, where Mrs Vincent had been the previous evening—spies to see what was going on, plotting the Temperance Hall and an opposition preacher in their treacherous hearts; but even Mrs Pigeon bent forward with excitement in the general flutter. When the minister said "My friends," you could have heard a pin drop in the crowded meeting; and when, a minute after, a leaf of holly detached itself and fluttered down from one of the gaslights, the whole row of people among whom it fell thrilled as if they had received a blow. Hush! perhaps it is not going to be so bad after all. He is talking of the text there over the platform, in its evergreen frame, which Phœbe trembles to think may come down any moment with a crash upon her father's anxious head. "Love one another!" Is Mr Vincent telling them that he is not sure what that means, though he is a minister—that he is not very sure what anything means—that life is a great wonder, and that he only faintly guesses how God, being pitiful, had the

heart to make man and leave him on this sad earth? Is that what he says as he stands pale before the silent assembly, which scarcely dares draw breath, and is ashamed of its own lightness of heart and vulgar satisfaction with things in general? That is what the minister says. "The way is full of such pitfalls—the clouds so heavy overhead—the heavens, so calm and indifferent, out of reach—cannot we take hands and help each other through this troubled journey?" says the orator, with a low voice and solemn eyes. When he pauses thus and looks them all in the face, the heart of Salem fails. The very gaslights seem to darken in the air, in the silence, and there is not one of the managers who does not hear the beating of his own heart. Then suddenly the speaker raises his voice, raises his hand, storms over their heads in a burst of indignation not loud but grand. He says "No."—"No!" exclaims the minister—"not in the world, not in the church, nowhere on earth can we be unanimous except by moments. We throw our brother down, and then extend a hand to him in charity—but we have lost the art of standing side by side. Love! it means that you secure a certain woman to yourself to make your hearth bright, and to be yours for ever; it means that you have children who are yours, to perpetuate your name and your tastes and feelings. It does not mean that you stand by your brother for him and not for you!"

Then there followed another pause. The Salem people drew a long breath and looked in each other's faces. They were guilty, self-convicted; but they could not tell what was to come of it, nor guess what the speaker meant. The anxious faces behind, gazing at him and his audience, were blank and horror-stricken, like so many conspirators whose leader was betraying their cause. They could not tell what accusation he might be going to make against them, to be confirmed by their consciences; but nobody except Tozer had the least conception what he was about to say.

The minister resumed his interrupted speech. Nobody had ventured to cheer him; but during this last pause, seeing that he himself waited, and by way of cheering up their own troubled hearts, a few feeble and timid plaudits rose from the further end of the room. Mr Vincent hurriedly resumed to stop this, with characteristic impatience. "Wait before you applaud me," said the Nonconformist. "I have said nothing that calls for applause. I have something more to tell you—more novel than what I have been saying. I am going to leave Carlingford. It was you who elected me, it is you who have censured me, it was you last night who consented to look over my faults and give me a new trial. I am one of those who have boasted in my day that I received my title to ordination from no bishop, from no temporal pro-

vision, from no traditionary church, but from the hands of the people. Perhaps I am less sure than I was at first, when you were all disposed to praise me, that the voice of the people is the voice of God; but, however that may be, what I received from you I can but render up to you. I resign into your hands your pulpit, which you have erected with your money, and hold as your property. I cannot hold it as your vassal. If there is any truth in the old phrase which calls a church a cure of souls, it is certain that no cure of souls can be delegated to a preacher by the souls themselves who are to be his care. I find my old theories inadequate to the position in which I find myself, and all I can do is to give up the post where they have left me in the lurch. I am either your servant, responsible to you, or God's servant, responsible to Him—which is it? I cannot tell; but no man can serve two masters, as you know. Many of you have been kind to me—chief among all," said Vincent, turning once round to look in Tozer's anxious face, "my friend here, who has spared no pains either to make me such a pastor as you wished, or to content me with that place when he had secured it. I cannot be content. It is no longer possible. So there remains nothing but to say good-bye—good-bye!—farewell! I will see you again to say it more formally. I only wish you to understand now that this is the decision I have come to, and that I

consider myself no longer the minister of Salem from this night."

Vincent drew back instantly when he had said these words, but not before half the people on the platform had got up on their feet, and many had risen in the body of the room. The women stretched out their hands to him with gestures of remonstrance and entreaty. "He don't mean it; he's not going for to leave us; he's in a little pet, that's all," cried Mrs Brown, loud out. Phœbe Tozer, forgetting all about the text and the evergreens, had buried her face in her handkerchief and was weeping, not without demonstration of the fact. Tozer himself grasped at the minister's shoulder, and called out to the astonished assembly that "they weren't to take no notice. Mr Vincent would hear reason. They weren't a-going to let him go, not like this." The minister had almost to struggle through the group of remonstrant deacons. "You don't mean it, Mr Vincent?" said Mrs Tozer; "only say as it's a bit o' temper, and you don't mean it!" Phœbe, on her part, raised a tear-wet cheek to listen to the pastor's reply; but the pastor only shook his head, and made no answer to the eager appeals which assailed him. When he had extricated himself from their hands and outcries, he hastened down the tumultuous and narrow passage between the benches, where he would not hear anything that was

addressed to him, but passed through with a brief nod to his anxious friends. Just as Vincent reached the door, he perceived, with eyes which excitement had made clearer than usual, that his enemy, Pigeon, had just got to his feet, who shouted out that the pastor had spoken up handsome, and that there wasn't one in Salem, whatever was their inclination, as did not respect him that day. Though he paid no visible attention to the words, perhaps the submission of his adversary gave a certain satisfaction to the minister's soul; but he took no notice of this nor anything else, as he hurried out into the silent street, where the lamps were lighted, and the stars shining unobserved overhead. Not less dark than the night were the prospects which lay before him. He did not know what he was to do —could not see a day before him of his new career; but, nevertheless, took his way out of Salem with a sense of freedom, and a thrill of new power and vigour in his heart.

Behind he left a most tumultuous and disorderly meeting. After the first outburst of dismay and sudden popular desire to retain the impossible possession which had thus slid out of their hands—after Tozer's distressed entreaty that they would all wait and see if Mr Vincent didn't hear reason—after Pigeon's reluctant withdrawal of enmity and burst of admiration, the meeting broke up into knots, and became not one

meeting, but a succession of groups, all buzzing in different tones over the great event. Resolutions, however, were proposed and carried all the same. Another deputation was appointed to wait on Mr Vincent. A proposal was made to raise his "salary," and a subscription instituted on the spot to present him with a testimonial. When all these things were concluded, nothing remained but to dismiss the assembly, which dispersed not without hopes of a satisfactory conclusion. The deacons remained for a final consultation, perplexed with alarms and doubts. The repentant Pigeon, restored to them by this emergency, was the most hopeful of all. Circumstances which had changed *his* mind must surely influence the pastor. An additional fifty pounds of "salary"—a piece of plate—a congregational ovation—was it to be supposed that any Dissenting minister bred at Homerton could withstand such conciliatory overtures as these?

CHAPTER XLIII.

But the deputation and the increased salary and the silver salver were all ineffectual. Arthur would not hear reason, as his mother knew. It was with bitter restrained tears of disappointment and vexation that she heard from him, when he returned to that conference in Susan's room, the events of the evening. It came hard upon the widow, who had invited her son to his sister's bedside that they might for the first time talk together as of old over all their plans. But though her heart ached over the opportunity thus thrown away, and though she asked herself with terror, "What was Arthur to do now?" his mother knew he was not to be persuaded. She smiled on Tozer next morning, ready to cry with vexation and anxiety as she was. "When my son has made up his mind, it will be vain for any one to try to move him," said the widow, proud of him in spite of all, though her heart cried out against his

imprudence and foolishness; and so it proved. The minister made his acknowledgments so heartily to the good butterman, that Tozer's disclaimer of any special merit, and declaration that he had but tried to "do his dooty," was made with great faltering and unsteadiness; but the Nonconformist himself never wavered in his resolve. Half of Carlingford sat in tears to hear Mr Vincent's last sermon. Such a discourse had never been heard in Salem. Scarcely one of the deacons could find a place in the crowded chapel to which all the world rushed; and Tozer himself listened to the last address of his minister from one of the doors of the gallery, where his face formed the apex and culminating point of the crowd to Mr Vincent's eyes. When Tozer brushed his red handkerchief across his face, as he was moved to do two or three times in the course of the sermon, the gleam seemed to the minister, who was himself somewhat excited, to redden over the entire throng. It was thus that Mr Vincent ended his connection with Salem Chapel. It was a heavy blow to the congregation for the time—so heavy that the spirit of the butterman yielded; he was not seen in his familiar seat for three full Sundays after; but the place was mismanaged in Pigeon's hands, and regard for the connection brought Tozer to the rescue. They had Mr Beecher down from Homerton, who made a very good

impression. The subsequent events are so well known in Carlingford, that it is hardly necessary to mention the marriage of the new minister, which took place about six months afterwards. Old Mr Tufton blessed the union of his dear young brother with the blushing Phœbe, who made a most suitable minister's wife in Salem after the first disagreeables were over; and Mr Beecher proved a great deal more tractable than any man of genius. If he was not quite equal to Mr Vincent in the pulpit, he was much more complaisant at all the tea-parties; and, after a year's experience, was fully acknowledged, both by himself and others, to have made an 'it.

Vincent meanwhile plunged into that world of life which the young man did not know; not that matters looked badly for him when he left Carlingford—on the contrary, the connection in general thrilled to hear of his conduct and his speech. The enthusiasm in Homerton was too great to be kept within bounds. Such a demonstration of the rightful claims of the preacher had not been made before in the memory of man; and the enlightened Nonconforming community did honour to the martyr. Three vacant congregations at least wooed him to their pulpits; his fame spread over the country: but he did not accept any of these invitations; and after a while the eminent Dissenting families who

invited him to dinner, found so many other independencies cropping out in the young man, that the light of their countenances dimmed upon him. It began to be popularly reported, that a man so apt to hold opinions of his own, and so convinced of the dignity of his office, had best have been in the Church where people knew no better. Such, perhaps, might have been the conclusion to which he came himself; but education and prejudice and Homerton stood invincible in the way. A Church of the Future—an ideal corporation, grand and primitive, not yet realised, but surely *real*, to be come at one day—shone before his eyes, as it shines before so many; but, in the mean time, the Nonconformist went into literature, as was natural, and was, it is believed in Carlingford, the founder of the 'Philosophical Review,' that new organ of public opinion. He had his battle to fight, and fought it out in silence, saying little to any one. Sundry old arrows were in his heart, still quivering by times as he fought with the devil and the world in his desert; but he thought himself almost prosperous, and perfectly composed and eased of all fanciful and sentimental sorrows, when he went, two or three years after these events, to Folkestone, to meet his mother and sister, who had been living abroad, away from him, with their charge, and to bring them to the little house he had prepared for

them in London, and where he said to himself he was prepared, along with them—a contented but neutral-coloured household—to live out his life.

But when Mr Vincent met his mother at Folkestone, not even the haze of the spring evening, nor the agitation of the meeting, which brought back again so forcibly all the events which accompanied the parting, could soften to him the wonderful thrill of surprise, almost a shock, with which he looked upon two of the party. The widow, in her close white cap and black bonnet, was unchanged as when she fell, worn out, into his arms on her first visit to Carlingford. She gave a little cry of joy as she saw her son. She trembled so with emotion and happiness, that he had to steady her on his arm and restrain his own feelings till another time. The other two walked by their side to the hotel where they were to rest all night. He had kissed Susan in the faint evening light, but her brother did not know that grand figure, large and calm and noble like a Roman woman, at whom the other passengers paused to look as they went on; and his first glance at the younger face by her side sent the blood back to his heart with a sudden pang and thrill which filled him with amazement at himself. He heard the two talking to each other, as they went up the crowded pier in the twilight, like a man walking in a dream. What his

mother said, leaning on his arm, scarcely caught his attention. He answered to her in monosyllables, and listened to the voices—the low, sweet laughter, the sound of the familiar names. Nothing in Susan's girlish looks had prophesied that majestic figure, that air of quiet command and power. And a wilder wonder still attracted the young man's heart as he listened to the beautiful young voice which kept calling on Susan, Susan, like some sweet echo of a song. These two, had they been into another world, an enchanted country? When they came into the lighted room, and he saw them divest themselves of their wrappings, and beheld them before him, visible tangible creatures and no dreams, Vincent was struck dumb. He seemed to himself to have been suddenly carried out of the meaner struggles of his own life into the air of a court, the society of princes. When Susan came up to him and laid her two beautiful hands on his shoulders, and looked with her blue eyes into his face, it was all he could do to preserve his composure, and conceal the almost awe which possessed him. The wide sleeve had fallen back from her round beautiful arm. It was the same arm that used to lie stretched out uncovered upon her sick-bed like a glorious piece of marble. Her brother could scarcely rejoice in the change, it struck him with so much wonder, and was so different from his thoughts.

Poor Susan! he had said in his heart for many a day. He could not say poor Susan now.

"Arthur does not know me," she said, with a low, liquid voice, fuller than the common tones of women. "He forgets how long it is ago since we went away. He thinks you cannot have anything so big belonging to you, my little mother. But it is me, Arthur. Susan all the same."

"Susan perhaps, since you say so—but not all the same," said Arthur, with his astonished eyes.

"And I daresay you don't know Alice either," said his sister. "I was little and Alice was foolish when we went away. At least I was little in Lonsdale, where nobody minded me. Somehow most people mind me now, because I am so big, I suppose; and Alice, instead of being foolish, is a little wise woman. Come here, Alice, and let my brother see you. You have heard of him every day for three years. At last here is Arthur; but what am I to do if he has forgotten me?"

"I have forgotten neither of you," said the young man. He was glad to escape from Susan's eyes, which somehow looked as if they were a bit of the sky, a deep serene of blue; and the little Alice imagined he did not look at her at all, and was a little mortified in her tender heart. Things began to grow familiar to

him after a while. However wonderful they were, they were real creatures, who did not vanish away, but were close by him all the evening, moving about—this with lovely fairy lightness, that with majestic maiden grace—talking in a kind of dual, harmonious movement of sound, filling the soft spring night with a world of vague and strange fascination. The window was opened in their sitting-room, where they could see the lights and moving figures, and, farther off, the sea—and hear outside the English voices, which were sweet to hear to the strangers newly come home. Vincent, while he recovered himself, stood near this window by his mother's chair, paying her such stray filial attentions as he could in the bewilderment of his soul, and slowly becoming used to the two beautiful young women, unexpected apparitions, who transformed life itself and everything in it. Was one his real sister, strange as it seemed? and the other——? Vincent fell back and resigned himself to the strange, sweet, unlooked-for influence. They went up to London together next day. Sunshine did not disperse them into beautiful mists, as he had almost feared. It came upon him by glimpses to see that fiery sorrow and passion had acted like some tropical tempestuous sun upon his sister's youth; and the face of his love looked back upon him from the storm in which it died,

as if somehow what was impossible might be possible again. Mrs Mildmay, a wandering restless soul as she was, happened to be absent from London just then. Alice was still to stay with her dearest friends. The Nonconformist went back to his little home with the sensation of an enchanted prince in a fairy tale. Instead of the mud-coloured existence, what a glowing, brilliant firmament! Life became glorious again under their touch. As for Mrs Vincent, she was too happy in getting home—in seeing Susan, after all the anguishes and struggles which no one knew of fully but herself, rising up in all the strength of her youth to this renewed existence—to feel as much distressed as she had expected about Arthur's temporary withdrawal from his profession. It was only a temporary withdrawal, she hoped. He still wore his clerical coat, and called himself "clergyman" in the Blue Book—and he was doing well, though he was not preaching. The Nonconformist himself naturally was less sober in his thoughts. He could not tell what wonderful thing he might not yet do in this wonderful elevation and new inspiring of his heart. His genius broke forth out of the clouds. Seeing these two as they went about the house, hearing their voices as they talked in perpetual sweet accord, with sweeter jars of difference, surprised the young man's life out

of all its shadows;—one of them his sister—the other ——. After all his troubles, the loves and the hopes came back with the swallows to build under his eaves and stir in his heart.

THE END.

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